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The "Voice Of Virginia": WRVA and Conversations of a Modern South.

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**THE "VOICE OF VIRGINIA":
WRVA and Conversations of a Modern South**

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**A Dissertation presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

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**The College of William and Mary
May 2012**

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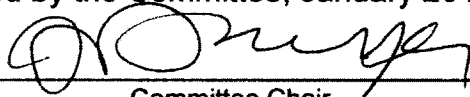
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Doctor of Philosophy



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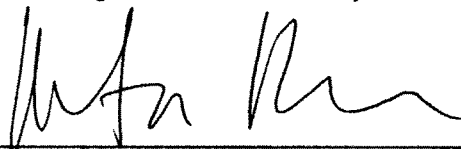
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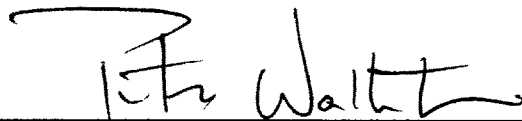
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ABSTRACT PAGE

The "'Voice of Virginia': WRVA and Conversations of a Modern South," is a study of the transformative and unpredictable role of radio – arguably America's first true "mass" medium – in a time and place where social and political power were heavily circumscribed by an entrenched system of race-, gender-, and class-based hierarchies. From 1925 when it first went on the air until at least the early 1960s, station WRVA of Richmond, Virginia, was one of the most powerful radio stations in the Mid-Atlantic. The 50,000-watt station, owned by William T. Reed's Edgeworth Tobacco Company and operated by a cadre of upwardly climbing white men, was intimately connected to Senator Harry Byrd's conservative political machine from 1925 onwards. Many if not most of the station's managers supported Byrd's efforts of "massive resistance" in the late 1950s and generally opposed any civil rights initiatives. But while the "Voice of Virginia" often conveyed the assumptions and rationalizations that buttressed Jim Crow ideologies through its programming, it also often undermined those same ideologies: such as when it showcased black and white performers on the Corn Cob Pipe Club, when it broadcast both CBS network news and local news, when popular entertainer "Sunshine Sue" glorified the heroism of the white working man on the Old Dominion Barn Dance, or when station officials engaged with the entreaties and complaints of listeners who had a diverse array of expectations for the role that radio would play in their community.

The cultural and political landscape of the mid-century South was already in transition when radio entered people's everyday lives, but radio created a new space where both broadcasters and listeners could explore the competing forces of change and stasis in a public forum. WRVA serves as a vehicle for understanding the ways in which discourses of southern identity, debates of "traditional" v. "modern," transformations in the workplace, and shifting perceptions of "whiteness" and "blackness" were all immensely unsettled and unresolved. WRVA's history demonstrates that Virginia's elite social and political leaders could not stabilize the debates, suggesting that the question we need to ask is not necessarily how conservative leaders imposed patriarchal hierarchies onto Virginians, but how they failed to do so despite legislation and bureaucratization. Radio's unfixed position in the political and social debates of the mid-century South indicates that even in a society as hegemonic as mid-century Virginia, people on the margins of power such as white, working-class men, African Americans, and women were mounting a successful protest of the status quo through the cultural realm. Because radio existed outside of traditional pathways to power in Virginia it became a space for performers and listeners to reinterpret existing systems of privilege and authority, with dramatic consequences. Here. Do not exceed 3500 characters including spaces, or one page of text.

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*For my amazing circle of friends and family,
and most especially for Judson and Charlie.*

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“For the City’s Sake”: An Introduction

“Radio world, this is the opening of station WRVA.”¹ With these words, radio station WRVA began broadcasting from downtown Richmond at 9PM on Monday, November 2, 1925. The modest 1,000-watt transmitter stood on top of the Edgeworth Tobacco plant at 22nd and Cary in the heart of “Tobacco Row,” the largest tobacco manufacturing center in the world. The 125-foot antenna rose 215 feet above street level, an impressive height by the standards of the time. The engineering booth on top of the Edgeworth plant only had room for two people at a time, but a half-mile away the recording studio on Main Street was filled to bursting with engineers, dignitaries, artists, and well-wishers.² Dr. W. Taliaferro Thompson, professor of Christian Education at Union Theological Seminary, began the broadcast with a prayer. The rest of the line-up included political speeches and music, with a cast that included both Governor E. Lee Trinkle and the presumed governor-elect Harry Byrd, the president and vice-president of Larus and Brother, Richmond mayor J. Fulmer Bright, and “other prominent Richmonders.”³ At precisely 11:55PM two musical groups, Arion’s Orchestra and the Old South Negro Quartet, joined forces at the microphone to

¹ Ray McAllister, “When WRVA Was Radio, and Life,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Jan. 23, 2003.

² “Radio Station Opens Here Officially,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Nov. 2, 1925. See also “Broadcasting Station Here Makes Official Bow Tonight,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Nov. 2, 1925.

³ “Radio Station Opens Here Officially,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Nov. 2, 1925.

perform “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” which was the station’s signature sign-off song from that point forward.⁴

The “Voice of Virginia,” one of the many slogans WRVA would adopt over the coming years, was in one sense a harmony of regional, masculine sounds that first night on the air: a devout prayer from a leader of the white Protestant community, the proud pontifications of white Democratic Party leaders, white Richmond officials, white tobacco industrialists, and music from both an all-white orchestra and a black *a capella* quartet. In another sense, it was a highly choreographed display of power and privilege, in which the VIPs were all white elites, the evening’s only black voices were singing Negro spirituals, and there were no women of any race.⁵ Radio was arguably the most modern sound in Richmond and Virginia in 1925, and yet WRVA’s first broadcast replicated sounds of the status quo as much as it pioneered new sounds for the future.

Few Richmonders saw it that way, though. To local listeners, WRVA was a critical innovation in a city whose inhabitants fretted about whether or not they were up-to-date.⁶ WRVA officials tried to reinforce the public impression of radio as an opportunity for improvement, promising to use the station for vaguely-defined “uplift.” That first night on the air, Harry Byrd solemnly informed WRVA

⁴ The General Assembly adopted “Carry Me Back to Old Virginia” fifteen years later as the state’s official song. As of 2012, “Carry Me Back” is the official state song emeritus while the politicians fight over what the new song will be.

⁵ Bertha Hewlett was part of the inaugural broadcast, and might even have played the piano when the orchestra and the quartet sang “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” but none of the listeners would have known a woman was in the studio because she got no credit, and no time at the microphone.

⁶ Historian Marie Tyler-McGraw argues that even when Virginians were reluctant to accept change, such as the New Deal, they ultimately wanted to keep pace with evolving national trends. Marie Tyler-McGraw, “The Up-to-Date City: Richmond in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Virginia Cavalcade* 44 (Winter 1995): 120-137.

officials that “you have an agency of very potential value in advertising the great assets and opportunities of the State of Virginia, and I predict for WRVA a future of most valuable service to Richmond and the State.”⁷ Station owner William T. Reed, Sr., reassured listeners that “It is our desire to render service to Richmond and Virginia,” but it remained to be seen how the station would translate that promise into policy.⁸ Over the next several decades, WRVA used its airwaves for church services, farm reports, political debates, and local news, all of which it tied to its mission of “uplift.” While WRVA’s interpretation and implementation of “uplift” evolved constantly, the mission itself tied the station closely to its listenership, for whom it had pledged its services. Listeners understood this from the first night WRVA went on the air, and looked upon the station as a resource and a tool as well as a novelty.

The station that described itself as “Down Where the South Begins” staked a position at the crossroads between old ways and new ways, aggressively seeking inclusion in a modern American narrative while equally aggressively towing along the weighty baggage of tradition and history. My dissertation explores the ways in which the janus-faced station reflected the paralysis of Virginia’s political and social systems at a time when Harry Byrd’s Democratic machine and racial purity laws made Virginia seem like a citadel of conservatism. As WRVA’s history demonstrates, the elite white men who ran Virginia had built an unstable hierarchy of citizenship that became increasingly vulnerable within its own complexity. The radio station was owned and operated

⁷ Walter R. Bishop, *WRVA Radio, 35 Years* (Richmond, VA: [WRVA?], 1960).

⁸ Ibid.

by white men with a deep commitment to Harry Byrd and his brand of conservatism, but the technology itself existed outside of traditional pathways to power in Virginia and became a space for performers and listeners to reinterpret existing systems of privilege and authority.

In a 2005 *American Quarterly* review of contributions to the history of sound, media scholar Michele Hilmes encouraged researchers and writers of the American experience to consider the critical role that “sound culture” has played in constituting both individual and collective identities in the United States.⁹ The “Voice of Virginia” was born into a time and place where a virtual oligarchy could not fully contain the forces of change. The station crossed into public and private spaces, and included the voices of the most powerful people in the state and nation as well as the voices of the least powerful. WRVA was a private business, but it also operated as a public service, a political instrument, and as a distributor and producer of cultural products. The sound culture that created and was created by WRVA in the early- to mid-twentieth century engages and bridges broad historiographical debates about the role of mass media in modern America, the ability of audiences to influence cultural producers, the interplay of regional and national identities, and the extent of the Byrd Machine’s totalitarian grasp on Virginia politics and society. This dissertation seeks to unite cultural and media history with recent interrogations of southern political history in order

⁹ Hilmes defines sound culture not as the study of sound itself, but as the cultural contexts out of which sound media emerged and which they in turn work to create. Michele Hilmes, “Is There a Field Called Sound Culture Studies? And Does It Matter?” *American Quarterly* 57 (March 2005): 249-259, 249.

to explore the complex mechanisms of change and resistance in the midcentury South.

In *Radio Voices*, an insightful examination of network radio broadcasting and corporate media culture, Michele Hilmes argued that broadcast radio became “the nation’s voice” in the 1920s and 1930s because “radio was in many ways unique: significantly different from any preceding or subsequent medium in its ability to transcend spatial boundaries, blur the private and public spheres, and escape visual determinations while still retaining the strong element of ‘realism’ that sound – rather than written words – supplies.”¹⁰ Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s work on the role of “imagined communities” in the creation of national identities, she demonstrates persuasively that radio became the canvas on which Americans painted notions of themselves and of their nation. The result was a portrait of heavily gendered and racialized expectations that often conflicted with reality; radio emphasized both a sweeping inclusiveness in American culture as well as a persistent fragmentation of it.

Susan Smulyan, building partly on the work of historian Robert McChesney, suggests that radio cannot be understood without taking into account the commercial imperatives of network broadcasting. In *Selling Radio*, Smulyan outlines the ways in which radio was first embraced in the early to mid-1920s by rural Americans thrilled with radio’s ability to collapse space and deliver novel sounds to isolated areas of the country. But the growth of consolidated, commercial radio networks “encouraged homogenous, rather than differentiated,

¹⁰ Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xvi.

programming. While local radio stations continued to aim specialized programming at some local listeners, national networks ignored differences, pushed aside music in favor of variety and drama, and presented and depended on a white, urban, middle-class, East Coast sensibility.”¹¹

WRVA was founded initially as a non-profit radio station, but quickly became an affiliate of NBC and later CBS, serving as a commercial radio station for the rest of its history. But despite its willing participation in the development of a commercialized network model during the late 1920s and 1930s, WRVA maintained a deep commitment to rural imagery and rural listeners well into the network era and beyond. The station self-consciously established itself as a link between rural and urban America – or more precisely, between a rural South and an urbanizing nation – suggesting that the development of commercial network radio was not as one-sided as historians have previously believed. The station's success at the crossroads between local and national cultures further suggests that listeners saw themselves as participating in multiple communities simultaneously, complicating the historiographical tendency to label sounds as “rural” or “urban.”

A recent trend in radio scholarship has been a close analysis of the formation and function of distinct radio audiences despite the industry's tendency to obscure differences between listeners. By the mid-1930s, radio was a regular

¹¹ Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 31. See also Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). McChesney argues that the rise of commercial broadcasting was not cemented by the Radio Act of 1927. Rather, the growing consolidation of commercial radio in the late 1920s and early 1930s gave rise to a populist reform movement intent on opposing for-profit radio as the sole model for American broadcasting.

presence in the lives of a vast majority of Americans. But until recently, the ways in which the audience used radio for their own purposes remained obscure. In *Radio's Intimate Public*, Jason Loviglio demonstrates the possibilities and limits of an individual's opportunities to use radio as a conduit for democratic participation.¹² Did radio make political discourse more accessible to those excluded from the political process, or did it merely function as a bait-and-switch – offering only the perception of inclusion as a means of courting consumers? Loviglio concludes that it did both, with the seemingly contradictory result of making diverse sounds and peoples part of a common media narrative while reinforcing the existence and desirability of a “normal” or an “average” American. In *Radio Active: Advertising and Consumer Activism*, Kathy Newman asks: if commercial radio was dedicated to the mission of turning listeners into consumers, how did listeners politicize their new position as mass consumers?¹³ Even though listeners' resistance to their own commodification as an audience was somewhat quixotic, Newman argues persuasively that the grassroots efforts of religious leaders, clubwomen, union officials, and consumer activists represented the potential of the new technology to unintentionally create the space – and desire – for powerful oppositional political coalitions.

Like Loviglio and Newman, I attempt to reconstruct WRVA's audience, the broadcasters' understanding of its preferences, and the listeners' own interpretations of what they were hearing, but I do so along a slightly different

¹² Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

¹³ Kathy M. Newman, *Radio Active: Advertising and Consumer Activism, 1935-1947* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

vector. WRVA provides a cross-section of radio listenership that was rooted in a geographic location at a specific moment. That is, WRVA gives us a window into both the place and space of radio broadcasting and listening, connecting *expressions* of community to the structural forms it took at the local, regional, and national levels. The history of WRVA thus offers an opportunity to explore the tension between imagined and lived experiences in the modern South, and how that tension translated into an inherently unstable political system.

Scholars of southern history have long been fascinated with the question of whether the South was making a break with the past in the early twentieth century, or rearticulating traditional forms of power through new institutions. Gender- and race-based paternalism undergirded southern political systems, but paternalism was perhaps not as monolithic or as transferrable as historians have previously thought. In his study of early-twentieth-century southern progressivism, historian William Link argues that while reform-minded white southern progressives never articulated a precise definition of “uplift,” they nonetheless adopted a common tone of racial paternalism.¹⁴ By the 1920s, when WRVA went on the air, however the paternalist model of racial reform was breaking under the weight of its own contradictions. The paradox of white southern reform efforts, Link argues, was a simultaneous desire to uphold Jim Crow while promoting black progress. When events forced white southern leaders to choose between segregation and “uplift” for black southerners, they

¹⁴ William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

chose segregation, thus making a distinctive decision to not break with the past despite a professed commitment to reform.

Link's investigation of reform efforts, while extensive, leaves the door open for further exploration of the degree to which the broader white community – particularly the poor and lower-middle-class white community – was increasingly restless when presented with paternalist ideology in the 1920s and especially in the 1930s and beyond. By focusing on the racial paternalism of white southern men, Link's work also suggests that fruitful avenues for new research could include the efforts of African Americans to destabilize the race-based hierarchies that paternalism supported, and the ways in which gender-based hierarchies were both revised and rearticulated in tandem with revisions to racial hierarchies. Over the past decade or so, historians J. Douglas Smith and Pippa Holloway have investigated the rhetorical and legal power of paternalism in early- to mid-twentieth-century southern politics, and begun the work of complicating the paradox that Link identified.

In *Managing White Supremacy*, J. Douglas Smith traces the legal evolution of the "Virginia Way" – loosely put, Virginia's white leaders' preference for consensual separation of the races – from the early twentieth century through the 1950s. He concludes that "managed race relations" entailed the constant revision and expansion of legal and electoral regulations if wealthy white Virginians hoped to maintain their authority over African Americans and nonelite white Virginians. Smith uses extensive documentation to illustrate the ways in which white Virginians were sometimes at war with one another over the best

approach to “management.” With a burgeoning white middle class and an increasingly urgent sense that Virginia needed to modernize if it was going to be competitive, a number of white Virginians held “moderate” positions on questions of African American political and economic parity in the early- to mid-twentieth century. Ultimately, however, the “moderate” whites remained silent or defected to the segregationist camps of conservatism when presented with a choice of real reform or entrenchment in the era of “massive resistance,” just as Link’s progressives had done a generation earlier.

Pippa Holloway’s work on early- to mid-twentieth-century Virginia suggests that white southern political leaders pursued sexual regulation as a means of turning their ideologies of gender-, class- and race-based hierarchies into legislated behaviors.¹⁵ Modern innovations – such as movies and birth control – prompted a concerted effort among elite and middle-class white Virginians (mostly men) to contain the transformative effects of those innovations and instead use them to buttress white male privilege. Holloway combines conventional sources such as politicians’ correspondence and judicial records with a wealth of new material about medical, social, and educational engineering that ultimately illuminates the ways in which powerful white Virginians deployed accusations of deviance and abnormality – directed primarily at poor whites, African Americans, and women in general – that shored up their own authority. The result is a sharply focused study of paternalism and paternalist ideologies that cuts through and sheds light on the numerous social and political systems

¹⁵ Pippa Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia, 1920-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

that contributed to the project of white supremacy and patriarchy in early-twentieth-century Virginia.

Smith, Holloway, and to a lesser extent, Link, are all asking how state power contributed to policies of white supremacy and the policing of it. Link examines how social institutions and government initiatives worked together to reinscribe white racial privilege in the early twentieth century in the name of “uplift,” while Smith and Holloway both look at the myriad ways that white Virginians acted as agents of the state engaged in a project that protected white male privilege, even if they were themselves not directly involved in the political apparatus.

WRVA was in one sense an instrument of the state, as subsequent chapters will show. But it was also the technology of a national culture, and an organ of mass media. Its position as both a local voice and a participant in a national conversation meant that while WRVA was certainly an instrument in “managing race relations” in Virginia, it was also an instrument of nation-making, which sometimes worked at cross purposes with the “Virginia Way.” Perhaps the most critical difference between WRVA’s role in the project of managed race relations and the role of, say, the State Board of Censors or the General Assembly, was the audience. As the dissertation will show, political discourse was as common in the WRVA studio as it was at the State Capitol. Many of WRVA’s owners and broadcasters were intimately involved in the legislative and judicial processes of Harry Byrd’s Virginia. But the technology was not fully tethered to those who owned and operated it. Listening to the radio was not

limited by gender, education, race, or economic situation, and WRVA officials knew that. They needed to cultivate a large, loyal audience if they were going to attract advertising revenue, so they offered diverse programming and established relatively inclusive policies of public relations. The station helped rearticulate white male privilege, but it also created a space where that privilege was meaningless. Even though WRVA was part of the broad police state that Pippa Holloway and J. Douglas Smith identify, the station was unable to fully deny anyone's citizenship not only because of contradictions inherent in paternalist ideologies, but because the station was intimately bound to the production of an inclusive local and national culture that the medium demanded.

A special issue of the *American Quarterly* entitled "Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies" recently asked "Does citizenship have a sound?"¹⁶ Through the acts of hearing, listening, and broadcasting, twentieth-century Americans have imagined and reimagined constructions of race and gender, engaged in civic debate, and expressed political agency. The sounds of the "Voice of Virginia" were not as heavily circumscribed by the Jim Crow era's rigid social expectations as the everyday behavior of Virginians was. The history of WRVA offers an unusual opportunity to explore the intersection of cultural projections of citizenship and political realities of citizenship in the shifting terrain of the mid-century South, as well as the slippages between the two that gradually undermined entrenched systems of power.

¹⁶ Kara Keeling and Josh Kun, "Introduction: Listening to American Studies," *American Quarterly* 63, (September 2011): 445-459, quotation from 445.

Before jumping into the story, a quick word on definitions is in order. Many people of the time threw around simplified oppositions such as South/North, black/white, rural/urban, or traditional/modern without much clarification. Indeed, the oppositions tended to shift in meaning across the period this dissertation explores, from the 1920s through the civil rights movements of the 1960s. The dissertation seeks both to explore the meaning behind the actors' vague usage of these terms, as well as to complicate the oppositions themselves.¹⁷ By necessity, however, I have had to employ many of the terms myself, though I try to use more precise description whenever possible. By "rural," I refer to geographical areas where farming is the predominant way of life, whereas "urban" refers to the cities themselves. I do my best to never refer to entire regions as either rural or urban, because that elides the very complexity I am hoping to investigate. In particular, I want to avoid replicating the generalizations of a "rural South" and an "urban North," even though that is precisely what many of my historical actors did. Any historical analysis of Richmond – or of any other city amid much farmland – must not fall into that trap. Additionally, I want to be sensitive to the ways in which people of the past spatialized the South as "rural" in order to articulate and/or deploy cultural or political ideologies.¹⁸ When used as adjectives, such as "rural rhythms" or "urban

¹⁷ I am drawing here on the five decades of scholarship exploring Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of binary oppositions. Derrida argued that much of Western thought and culture was predicated on a logic of binaries, with the binaries themselves creating hierarchies and ideologies.

¹⁸ There is a wide variety of literature on this phenomenon. Dana White helpfully navigates some of the earliest studies of an "urban South," placing them into a broader intellectual context of conceptualizations of "the South" in the early and mid twentieth century. See Dana F. White, "Cities in Full: The Urban South during the Final Century of the Past Millennium," in Craig S.

entertainment,” I ascribe values or patterns of behavior to the realities of life either in the vast, sometimes isolated expanses of farmland or to the densely populated and industrialized cities.

My use of the terms “South,” “southern,” and “southerner” is in a similar vein. I try not to replicate the usages of my historical actors, but I must nevertheless acknowledge that by imagining themselves as “southerners,” people of Virginia often made choices that reinforced their difference or distinctiveness from people of other regions. While I reject the notion that a “southern culture” unified the experiences of southerners, even if broken down into categories of race, class, and gender, it is true for example that a southern sound emerged during the 1920s and 1930s, as did southern entertainment. And so I must acknowledge that certain policies, practices, and beliefs connected people who shared a geographical region. This work does not attempt to suggest a pan-southern “mindset,” nor does it seek to identify a “real” South.¹⁹ Rather, I will spend my time analyzing the discursive power of the specter of “the South,” and how people used WRVA as a conduit for fighting over it.

Trickiest of all are my recurrent usages of “modern” and “traditional.” To study twentieth-century southern history is to be continually confronted with non-linear interpretations of it. To historical actors, “the past” – frequently described

Pascoe, Karen Trahan Leathem, and Andy Ambrose, eds., *The American South in the Twentieth Century* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 127-139.

¹⁹ W.J. Cash made himself crazy trying to reconcile abstract notions of “the South” and its inhabitants with concrete definitions and actual human experience in the late 1920s. He wrote a series of articles for H.L. Mencken’s *American Mercury* between 1925 and 1929, including an essay that he would later turn into a book entitled *The Mind of the South*, which he published a decade later. W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Knopf, 1941). For Cash, “the South” was both new and old, and he argued that the region was not so different from the rest of the country until the Civil War.

euphemistically as “old” or “tradition” – is really a fiction of the present, as Grace Hale has so persuasively argued in the case of white southerners.²⁰ “Tradition” was also often wielded by opponents of change, who imagined the enemy to be modernity itself.²¹ The assertion of “tradition” as an oppositional force to “the modern” was not solely a strategy of white southerners, either; historian Michael Kammen has persuasively demonstrated that early-twentieth-century Americans reflexively sought alternatives to urbanization and industrialization in the imagined utopia of “tradition.”²² To keep my analysis distinct from the historical discourses I am examining, I have adopted perhaps overly simplified definitions for these two terms. “Traditional” refers to any set of values, practices, or beliefs that were commonplace in the last few decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. In this sense, “tradition” is more a fact of generation

²⁰ The seeds for this creative use of time and history were sown in the years after the Civil War, Hale argues, when “left alone with freedpeople fighting to retain their citizenship, many white southerners turned wistfully away from present conflicts to a past named ‘old’ and therefore distant, a time that northern minstrel shows had established as infinitely entertaining.” Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 52.

²¹ T.J. Jackson Lears has studied what he calls the “antimodern impulse” extensively in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century American history. He argues that antimodern protests, which come in the form of critiques of modern life and desperate searches for “authenticity,” ultimately “helped to shape new modes of cultural authority for the oncoming twentieth century.” T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 6. I agree with him that twentieth-century critiques of an abstract notion of modernity often only add to the further breakdown or revision of the “morals and manners” between one generation and another. I have not employed the term “antimodernism,” however, because I think it falsely identifies the focus of the anxiety, at least in 1920s Virginia.

²² Kammen’s challenge to view American traditionality largely as “the need to reconcile tradition with democratic values, though not necessarily with the practice of democracy” has informed much of my inquiry into the role of “tradition” in WRVA’s programming, and Virginia in general, from 1925 into the 1960s. It is worth pointing out that Michael Kammen’s study of American public memory is extensive, but not exhaustive. Most notably, he largely avoids discussion of mass culture or popular culture because he views their articulations of American identity, heritage, or history as commercialized memories, and therefore not “authentic.” He barely mentions radio at all, for example. Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1991), 701.

– the experiences of one’s parents or grandparents – than an essentialized set of premodern values. Similarly, my use of “modern” is often synonymous with “contemporary,” but without the historical actors’ selective interpretation of current events. When I speak of a “modern South,” I am not referring to some sort of liberalized, or progressive, or urbanizing, or even conservatively entrenched South. Instead, I am speaking of the myriad competing influences that were rupturing the weak mechanisms of social and political control that had shaped events in southern states in the early twentieth century. The confusion and the ruptures are what contributed to the rise of what I’m calling the “modern South,” not their resolution in favor of one party or another. In the words of historian Ed Ayers, “modernity has appeared [in the South’s history] in strange places and in strange combinations.”²³ This is a story about how WRVA was one such strange place, broadcasting undeniably strange combinations.

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The years after the First World War saw sweeping social, economic, and political transformations in America that were as widespread as they were controversial. From the end of the war in 1918 until the stock market crashed in 1929, American life underwent profound upheaval. Women successfully concluded their campaign for suffrage, young people heavily revised Victorian manners and morals, corporations nationalized business on an unprecedented scale, a burgeoning middle class discovered the joys of rampant consumerism, and thousands of African Americans left the Jim Crow South in droves in search

²³ Edward L. Ayers, *What Caused the Civil War? Reflections on the South and Southern History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 10.

of better wages and civil rights. Alongside experiments with the new, however, was a movement to safeguard “old” values, or at the very least to safeguard the authority of those who had traditionally enjoyed it. Unions found themselves under siege as public opinion and the government turned against them in the aftermath of the 1919 strikes. Race riots the same year indicated that America’s “race problem” was not limited to the South, and the Ku Klux Klan gained momentum across the decade in response both to massive immigration and to African Americans challenging racial inequality.²⁴ Many people looked upon the decade’s transformation of morals with deep suspicion, and condemned flappers, drinking, and jazz as corrosive influences on “traditional” American values. Intense debates about the future of the nation, and the role of its diverse citizens, waged without resolution through the 1920s.

Radio became both a site for these debates, and a cause of them. Emily Thompson has argued that a “soundscape of modernity” emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century, in which Americans experienced and contributed to dramatic cultural change through innovations in sound technology.²⁵ Broadcast radio brought the sounds of Harlem jazz clubs, Chicago

²⁴ The term “race problem” or “Negro problem” was a common euphemism for a wide variety of political and cultural debates or phenomena that were the result of racial inequality in America. The Chicago Commission on Race Relations, for example, in its report on the Chicago race riots of 1919, referred to cause of the riots as a “race problem.” Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), 644.

²⁵ Thompson argues, “The physical aspects of a soundscape consist not only of the sounds themselves, the waves of acoustical energy permeating the atmosphere in which people live, but also the material objects that create, and sometimes destroy, those sounds. A soundscape’s cultural aspects incorporate scientific and aesthetic ways of listening, a listener’s relationship to their environment, and the social circumstances that dictate who gets to hear what. A soundscape, like a landscape, ultimately has more to do with civilization than with nature, and as such, it is constantly under construction and always undergoing change.” Emily Thompson, *The*

barn dances, presidents, college professors, and sports into Americans' domestic spaces. Prior to the 1920s, most radio listening had been done in private, on point-to-point receivers in attics and barns. By the early 1920s, however, large radio receivers and a growing number of broadcasting stations made it possible for whole families to listen in at the same time, and radio "became a truly American social practice."²⁶ Radio offered news, novelty, and entertainment to listeners eager for new sounds and experiences.

Radio, bringing voices and music and ideas into the homes and businesses of ever-increasing numbers of Americans, was hailed as a miracle technology in the 1920s. In 1922, a writer for *The American Review of Reviews* asked Guglielmo Marconi how radio might change the lives of ordinary people. Marconi, widely credited with the invention of radio, replied, "[Radio] has till recently been a means of salvation to mariners, a valuable instrument of war, and of occasional use in commerce. It is now beginning to be the servant of all who have word to send between distant parts of the earth, the most general, the cheapest, and the quickest means of communication ever dreamed of for long distances." Radio would shrink time and space, taking "another long step...in the process of narrowing the earth, and making friends and neighbors out of distant peoples."²⁷ *The New Republic* praised radio as "a genuinely important medium of intellectual communication," and bemoaned the fact that "in most parts of the

Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 1.

²⁶ Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 57.

²⁷ Stanley Frost, "Marconi and His Views of Wireless Progress," *The American Review of Reviews* 66 (May 17, 1922): 166-170, quotations from 170, 169.

country full 90 percent of the non-musical material on the air is sheer rubbish.”

“This new and marvelous means of transmitting ideas cannot be allowed to go largely to waste,” the magazine cautioned.²⁸ *The Wireless Age* enumerated the virtues of radio for isolated farming communities, claiming that radio “will be a great uniting force binding the ends of our great commonwealth together. The voice of the President has been heard in all parts of the country; great musicians, educators, speakers, from all the world have also been heard in the most remote farm house in the land.”²⁹ From shrinking distances to communicating with the nation to rendering isolation obsolete, radio was a wonder drug of the 1920s, even if critics worried it was not always used correctly.

Radio was unusual in that many different kinds of people thought it was a wonderful addition to the American landscape of the 1920s. People who were normally divided about some of the era's other innovations – new trends in women's fashion, the explosive growth of cities, and the rise of secular entertainment, for example – were mostly all optimistic about radio's potential. Priests, politicians, elementary school teachers, agricultural researchers, college professors, musicians, and sociologists all heralded the new technology as a vehicle for progress and uplift. Historian Michele Hilmes argues that radio “presented opportunities for cultural expression and national self-definition never before available, not only in the United States but in countries around the world.”³⁰ Susan Douglas goes a step further, arguing that the utopian ideal of

²⁸ “The Future of Radio,” *The New Republic* 40 (Oct. 8, 1924): 135-136.

²⁹ F.C. Gilbert, “Rural Life Modernized,” *The Wireless Age* 12 (March 1925): 24, 27, 69-71, quotation on 70.

³⁰ Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952*, 6.

national unity itself was the most alluring – and commonly cited – benefit of early radio: “Repeatedly, the achievement of cultural unity and homogeneity was held up, implicitly and explicitly, as a goal of the highest importance.”³¹ Hilmes and Douglas draw from Benedict Anderson’s argument that modern nations exist as ideas and feelings rather than geographical locations. A sense of nationalism arises not from daily interactions between citizens, but from an “imagined community” of otherwise physically (and perhaps socially) disconnected people who believe themselves to be part of the same project.³² Media, and in this case radio, becomes the conduit through which otherwise disconnected people build a sense of communion with one another, and with the nation. When radio became a widespread technology in the 1920s, social commentators, broadcasters, and listeners for the most part seemed to agree that radio would improve and strengthen the United States, though they disagreed about the ways in which this could happen.

Some observers saw radio as a perfect tool for assimilation and civic engagement. Reporter J.M. McKibbin expressed a popular opinion in 1923 that radio would turn immigrants into Americans by exposing them to an allegedly common culture and teaching them English in the process.³³ Political commentator Mark Sullivan predicted that radio would transform the American

³¹ Susan J. Douglas, *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 306-307.

³² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New ed., (New York: Verso, 2006).

³³ J.M. McKibbin, Jr., “The New Way to Make Americans,” *Radio Broadcast* 2 (January 1923): 238-239.

political system by giving more power to the “people,” who in this case were radio listeners:

Theoretically, a politician may believe in some other form of government than through public opinion or public emotion. But practically they know that is the form of government that is now here. And if you assent to the principle of government by public opinion, you must assent also to the doctrine that the wider the dissemination of public information, and the greater the number of persons enabled to participate in the formation of common judgments and common reactions in the shape of emotion, the more logical it is.³⁴

If a democracy is a government directed by public opinion, and radio was bringing politics directly into people’s parlors, Sullivan thought that radio would serve to increase the power of public opinion, and therefore strengthen American democracy. Debates over whether radio contributed to or detracted from democratic ideals intensified over the 1920s and especially the 1930s, but no one seemed to doubt that radio was a powerful political instrument, and that citizens were interested in using it for information.

Others perceived radio as an instrument of education, and urged broadcasters to donate as much time as possible to educational programming. Indeed, when WRVA went on the air in 1925, ninety educational institutions already had licenses to broadcast.³⁵ Cline Koon, of the U.S. Office of Education, issued guidelines to elementary school teachers who were interested in using radio in the classroom. Such pedagogic innovation was to be encouraged, Koon stated, as “radio’s superiority over other available means of instruction should be demonstrable.” If used correctly, “the broadcasts should stimulate reflective

³⁴ Mark Sullivan, “Will Radio Make the People the Government?” *Radio Broadcast* 6 (November 1924): 19-25, quotation from 20.

³⁵ Stanley E. Frost, Jr., *Education’s Own Stations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), 4. As cited in Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio*, 66.

thinking, supplement the teacher's instruction, and motivate class projects."³⁶ A 1932 issue of *The Museums Journal* strongly advocated museum directors to make arrangements with broadcasters to bring museum lectures to the radio audience. The museums could then bring lecture series such as "Conversations with Artists," "Changing Nature," and "Biology in the Service of Man" to a much wider swath of the citizenry than they ever could have done without radio.³⁷ Proponents of educational programming hoped to use radio for the education of both adults and children, to create a more informed public and nation.

The early debate in trade publications about whether radio stations should play classical music or jazz underscores a broader point about the developing industry: the language of uplift was also often the language of condescension. Susan Smulyan has argued that in the 1920s, most radio broadcasters preferred to play classical music because they saw it as "a form of listener education and uplift, while listeners often sought jazz."³⁸ A handful of surveys in the mid-1920s indicated that listeners themselves seemed to welcome jazz, classical music, and popular music generally, though they did not always agree about the desirable ratio of each.³⁹ Broadcasters' insistence in the early years of radio upon including classical music and opera in the schedule at the expense of popular music and jazz suggests a vague but pervasive commitment

³⁶ Cline M. Koon, "The Technique of Teaching with Radio," *The Elementary School Journal* 34, no. 2 (October 1933): 106-110, quotation from 106.

³⁷ "Museums and Broadcasting," *The Museums Journal* 31 (March 1932): 539-540. *The Museums Journals* was a British publication, and the article in question focused specifically on cultivating a relationship between museum directors and the BBC. The article's recommendation was a broad one, however, and one that museums in the United States were already attempting to implement.

³⁸ Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio*, 97.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 96-98.

to “high-brow” programming over the tastes of radio’s diverse audience. As Lawrence Levine demonstrated persuasively in *High Brow/Low Brow*, creating a cultural hierarchy in which some art forms were “serious” while others were “popular” was a critical component of establishing privileges of race and class in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century America.⁴⁰ A number of early radio broadcasters, almost all of whom were white men from the middle and upper classes, positioned radio in that tradition, with less and less success as commercialization and the demands of a mass audience superseded considerations of cultural uplift.

In the mid-1920s, radio seemed to symbolize the limitless possibilities of a modern age. The new technology could collapse distance, inspire intellectual discourse, provide infinite (free) entertainment, and even “make Americans.”⁴¹ Sounds of the city radiated into the countryside, and sounds of the countryside were sometimes piped back in to the city. With a decent radio set, a family on a Nebraska farm could listen to jazz from Harlem, longshoremen in Boston could listen to Jack Dempsey defending his heavyweight title, and people everywhere could tune in to sounds of fellow countrymen they had never and probably would never meet.⁴² The future of the technology was up for grabs in 1925 – how would it make money? would the government regulate it? what sorts of

⁴⁰ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), see p. 68 in particular.

⁴¹ J.M. McKibbin, Jr., “The New Way to Make Americans,” *Radio Broadcast* 2 (January 1923): 238-239.

⁴² As a point of interest, Douglas Gomery ascribes the origin of American broadcasting directly to the Jack Dempsey – Georges Carpentier boxing match of July 2, 1921, which was transmitted live via radio. For a full description of the fight and its impact on the history of radio, see “Broadcasting’s Beginning: The Big Bang,” in Douglas Gomery, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 1-9.

programming were acceptable? exactly who was listening in? – but almost no one argued that radio was a fad. Radio was giving sound to a new era in American history.

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The 1920s and 1930s saw Richmond's entrance into modern America, certainly more so than the decades that preceded it. A number of the city's residents were preoccupied with pulling the area into the new era for a number of different reasons. "Richmonders worried if they were up-to-date," argues historian Marie Tyler-McGraw, "or even if they should be."⁴³ A city that had been largely reduced to rubble in 1865 was throbbing with people, energy, and new-found wealth in the 1920s, and many of its inhabitants eagerly pursued opportunities for entertainment and advancement. The arrival of jazz, mass-produced clothing, automobiles, professional baseball, and talking films transformed Richmond as a cultural center, but it did not necessarily signal a corresponding transformation in the city's and the state's political and social systems. At least not initially. No matter how badly Richmonders wanted to be up-to-date, "the city's' leadership...remained conservative and placed a higher value on public order, tradition, and white unity than on modernizing public services and structures."⁴⁴ Like radio elsewhere in the country, WRVA symbolized the possibilities of the new era. But the station was also controlled by individuals who perhaps felt they had more to lose than to gain if Virginia embraced all the trappings of a "modern" America. In the 1920s, Richmond and

⁴³ Marie Tyler-McGraw, "The Up-to-Date City: Richmond in the 1920s and 1930s," *Virginia Cavalcade* vol 44, no. 3 (Winter 1995): 120-137, quotation on 121.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

Virginia oscillated back and forth on the spectrum of “modern” and “traditional,” as evolving social practices occasionally clashed with the guardians of power. When it first went on the air, WRVA represented both the new and the old, and the ways in which the tension between the two manifested itself in programming and listenership is of utmost interest to this dissertation.

The many different sounds of WRVA collectively constitute one of the most identifiable cultural innovations in 1920s Virginia. The radio station introduced listeners to people and information they would probably not otherwise have encountered, showcased the music of southerners on the move, and ultimately brought national programming into local homes. The station also exported sounds of southernness, involving Richmonders in broad conversations about regional identity, the appropriate interpretation of southern history, and the South’s position in a modern America. Debates about the relative merits of national culture and southern distinctiveness were well underway by the time WRVA went on the air, but radio created a more inclusive forum for debate than most, and WRVA amplified the conversation over thousands of watts.

Before we can discuss the impact of locally-owned radio on Virginia’s cultural landscape, however, we must take into account the climate of social and political conservatism that looked uneasily upon new behaviors and attitudes. Experimentation and innovation came with a price; a number of white southerners (as well as non-southerners) interpreted alterations in racial and gender norms as dangerous assaults on the social order. In *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, historian Nancy MacLean has investigated the ways in which black

activism, feminism, and white liberalism emerged in the 1910s and 1920s to mount significant challenges to figures and institutions of authority in Georgia, often prompting reactionary responses. While some of the challenges were overt and highly publicized, such as the biracial Commission on Interracial Cooperation, other perceived challenges were largely symbolic: young women's shorter skirts, black women aggressively seeking alternatives to domestic service, African Americans choosing to leave the South altogether.⁴⁵ Music also became a battleground, as sounds became linked to behaviors or racial identities, and the act of *listening* could be construed as a political statement. Professing preferences for "hillbilly" or "race" music in the 1920s, for example, suggested sympathies for rural whites or African Americans, respectively. Preferences for classical music or jazz suggested a different set of sympathies.⁴⁶ Debates over music, fashion, or behavior reflected and contributed to broader debates about transformations in race-, gender-, and class-based norms in the 1920s. WRVA was conceived as a modern innovation, but its "parents" and caretakers were part of the old social order that looked suspiciously upon many of the changes of the new era. To understand the tight line that WRVA and its officials walked, we need to first explore the station's origins, and especially the political system into which it was born.

⁴⁵ Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). See in particular Chapter 2, "Where Money Rules and Morals Rot: The Vice of Modernity."

⁴⁶ For a complex argument about different iterations of commercial African American music, for example, and "the variety of attitudes that developed around each musical style and the many ways these attitudes converged," please see Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from BeBop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 117-120. For broad consideration of the commercial and academic influences on the development of "hillbilly" music v. "race records," please see Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

WRVA was operated by local tobacco firm Larus and Brother Company, which was owned by the Reed family in 1925. William, Pleasant, and John Reed, all brothers, were part of a class of white, southern business progressives who wanted to modernize the region through a limited set of reforms that would foster economic growth. Historian Pippa Holloway has argued that Richmond was one of the first cities in the region to embrace the principles of business progressivism, which called upon the state government to make the business of conducting business easier.⁴⁷ The Reeds applied reform ideologies to their endeavors in both the public and private sectors. They built a new plant in 1925, for example, that made use of the architecture of scientific management, simultaneously introducing more light and aeration for the workers, as well as better surveillance of them. They also adopted a five-day work week in 1921 and claimed in 1936 to have “never had any labor troubles and [have] always paid better than average wages.”⁴⁸ Their pretensions to welfare capitalism most likely would not have withstood close scrutiny, but their intent was clear.⁴⁹ The executives of the Larus and Brother Company thought of themselves as benevolent industrialists who were genuinely concerned with the safety of (and

⁴⁷ Highways, tax reforms, and a modern bureaucracy acting in service of Virginia industry were all examples of reforms suggested by business progressives which met with approval from a broad audience. Pippa Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia*, 12.

⁴⁸ Larus & Brother Co., Inc, *Handbook (Confidential): 1936* [n. pub], 1936, 3. Calvin T. Lucy Papers, 1914-1978, Virginia Commonwealth University Library, Richmond, Virginia. Hereafter cited as VCU: Lucy papers.

⁴⁹ In fact, in the fall of 1941, the Larus and Brother plant was partially closed for about a month as the Tobacco Workers International Union (TWIU) called for a strike in protest of Charles Reed's refusal of the TWIU's request for a closed shop. The TWIU did not extend membership to the plant's black workers, however, who continued to work throughout the strike. “Strike Voted; Larus Plant Is Picketed; Management Rejects Closed Shop Demand,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Oct. 8, 1941.

perhaps even the relative contentment of) their employees at the same time that they maximized profits.⁵⁰

In matters of state, the Reed family wielded considerable power, and they played a significant role in translating a desire for limited reform in service of economic growth into legislative and bureaucratic policy in the 1920s and 1930s. William Thomas Reed in particular was heavily involved in matters of state and national politics. He was a lifetime friend and mentor to Harry Byrd, whom Pippa Holloway describes as “an exemplary business progressive,” among other things. Although Reed never held elected office, he held a number of appointments and conducted a great deal of political business as Byrd’s representative.⁵¹ As Byrd’s power grew over the 1920s and 1930s, so did Reed’s.

⁵⁰ I use the term “welfare capitalism” in the same way Elizabeth Cohen uses it in her monograph *Making a New Deal*. A number of industrialists fused progressive ideologies with corporate strategy in the early twentieth century, attempting to create more efficient and profitable businesses that also provided for the welfare of the employees through incentives and benefits. As Cohen notes, welfare capitalism was a paternalistic ideology that solidified managements’ social control of the workforce. Larus and Brother Company executives were adapting ideologies of welfare capitalism to the urban South, but with considerably less zeal than their counterparts in Chicago that Cohen describes. They did not, for example, offer the full package of benefits that were becoming the standard in large manufacturing centers elsewhere in the country. See Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), particularly 208-209.

⁵¹ The second chapter of this dissertation, “50,000 Watts of Noise: The Rise of Calvin T. Lucy,” will explore the relationship between Reed, Byrd, and WRVA thoroughly. The short version is this: William T. Reed had known Harry Byrd for most of his life. In their adulthoods, the two men hunted and politicked together, and built a powerful network of political and business leaders over which Byrd resided, known as the Byrd machine. Historian Ronald Heinemann, in his 1996 biography *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, used the large body of correspondence between the two men to flesh out Harry Byrd’s private feelings. Byrd and Reed, though frequently business or political partners, wrote to one another as old friends, confiding personal feelings and convictions that they did not articulate in other aspects of their lives that were dutifully observed for the public record. Ronald L. Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

Central to Harry Byrd's and the Reed brothers' brand of business progressivism was a deep commitment to white southern paternalism.⁵² Under the guise of "civility" and "gentility," elite white men in early-twentieth-century Virginia worked hard to establish themselves as the state's unchallenged "natural" leaders, and to keep the rest of the electorate – black or white, male or female – from becoming politically engaged. Historian J. Douglas Smith argues that white elites embraced "a particularly genteel form of paternalism" in order to manage race relations: "Intent on maintaining order and stability, practitioners of the idea of managed race relations wholeheartedly supported segregation and disfranchisement but rejected the rigid racial oppression and violence trumpeted elsewhere in the South."⁵³

The genteel paternalism that Smith describes held true in areas of Virginia life beyond race relations. Relationships between upper-class and working-class whites, relationships between men and women, relationships between wealthy landowners and subsistence farmers, and relationships between employers and employees were all subject to paternalist interpretation. In early-twentieth-century Virginia, a small group of wealthy white men believed themselves to be the best and most deserving leaders of their communities, businesses, and households. In theory, they extended their protection and guidance to their families and the people of Virginia in exchange for deference and authority. It

⁵² As historian William Link has demonstrated persuasively, paternalism was the driving force behind many southern progressive initiatives. By the 1910s, Link argues, southern reformers of all races added the legitimizing rationale of paternalism to their own certainties of "correctness" in order to remake social and political institutions. William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, 95.

⁵³ J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 4.

was never a particularly stable arrangement – as this dissertation will show – and challenges to their authority only provoked the elite Virginians to cling even tighter to their paternalist ideologies.

Nothing better represented the consolidation of the power of Virginia's elites than the Democratic machines that held the state in an iron grip for more than half of the century. In the aftermath of the Civil War and Reconstruction, the lilywhite Democratic Party did not enjoy the domination of state politics it had enjoyed before the war. In the 1870s and 1880s, a coalition of black Republicans, white Republicans, and populist white Democrats had formed the Readjuster Party, which gained control of the state in the early 1880s. Much of what the Readjusters had wanted – an approach to debt that burdened taxpayers less and benefited internal improvements more, public education, and rudimentary government services for the mentally ill – would have been perfectly reasonable to conservative Democrats of the early twentieth century.⁵⁴ But the success of the biracial and cross-class alliances forged in the Readjuster's crucible terrified the white elites who ran the state's Democratic Party. Support for the Readjusters had already dwindled to a trickle by 1890, and white conservative Democrats had regained control of state government, but elites' fears of a second opposition coalition lingered for many decades. Conservative

⁵⁴ Significantly, one of the first post-mortem assessments of the Readjuster phenomenon cast the Readjuster platform in an entirely different light – one which would inform the memory of the epoch. B.B. Munford, writing in an 1889 issue of *State*, declared that Readjuster legislation “tended to subserve the interests of the masses and to break the power of wealth and established privilege.” The statement was not complimentary, and was meant to inspire [elite] white fear of chaos and social disorder. Later, citing Munford as proof, Charles Pearson declared that Radical Reconstruction and the Readjuster Party both belonged to the “dark ages” of the South's history. B.B. Munford, writing for *State* (September 13, 1889). As cited in Charles Chilton Pearson, *The Readjuster Movement in Virginia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917), 146.

Democrats ultimately curbed the political rights of the majority of Virginia's electorate, reserving special animus for African Americans. As J. Douglas Smith puts it succinctly, "Although white elites most feared another insurgent movement like the one led by [Readjuster] Mahone, they chose to make blacks the scapegoats."⁵⁵ Historian Peter Wallenstein has referred to the concerted campaign of black disenfranchisement as a "counterrevolution," in which white Virginians "targeted black Virginians for political neutralization."⁵⁶

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, conservative Democrats found a number of ways to achieve their desired goals of "managing" the electorate and solidifying their control of state government. The 1902 Constitutional Convention and the rise of the Democratic political machine opened a new chapter in Virginia's history. The 1902 Constitution, which remained in effect until July 1, 1971, implemented literacy tests and poll taxes to effectively disfranchise almost all black voters and about half of white voters in the state.⁵⁷ Carter Glass, then a state senator, had promised his suffrage plan would "eliminate the darkey as a political factor in this State in less than five years, so that in no single county of the Commonwealth will there be the least concern felt for the complete supremacy of the white race in the affairs of government." When asked whether he thought the state would achieve this by fraud or by discrimination, he claimed

Discrimination! Why that is exactly what we propose; that exactly is what this Convention was elected for – to discriminate to the very extremity of

⁵⁵ J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 23.

⁵⁶ Peter Wallenstein, *Blue Laws and Black Codes: Conflict, Courts, and Change in Twentieth-Century Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 7.

⁵⁷ Heinemann, et al, *Old Dominion, New Commonwealth*, 277.

permissible action under the limitations of the Federal Constitution with the view to the elimination of every negro voter who can be gotten rid of, legally, without materially impairing the numerical strength of the white electorate...It is a fine discrimination, indeed, that we have practiced in the fabrication of this plan; and now, Mr. President, we ask the Convention to confirm our work and emancipate Virginia.⁵⁸

Glass's speech underscores a critical pattern that Virginia's Democratic party would replicate many times over the next half-century. Politicians publicly launched fierce and unapologetic legislative or judicial attacks upon black Virginians while also quietly limiting the rights and opportunities of working-class whites. Rhetorically, the conservative Democrats were using the specter of black political power to unify all white Virginians. But practically speaking, conservative Democrats were severely curtailing the political rights of thousands of white Virginians as well.⁵⁹

The 1902 constitution did not only disfranchise thousands of black Virginians; it also institutionalized racial discrimination in almost every aspect of public life, and in a great deal of private life as well. Schools, public transportation, residential neighborhoods, and even marriage were all subject to the legal machinery of Jim Crow, which held that "separate but equal" was constitutional. African Americans had been vigorously and successfully challenging white attempts at racial segregation in the late nineteenth century, but with the restriction of the franchise and the state's new 1902 constitutional

⁵⁸ Statement of Carter Glass, *Report of the Proceedings and Debates of the Constitutional Convention, State of Virginia, held in the City of Richmond, June 12, 1901, to June 26, 1902*, vol. 2 (Richmond, VA: The Hermitage Press, 1906). As cited in J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 26.

⁵⁹ Between the 1900 and 1904 presidential elections, during which time the 1902 Constitution became state law, the percentage of people voting in Virginia fell by more than a half. Voter participation declined further into the 1910s and 1920s. Heinemann, *et al*, *Old Dominion, New Commonwealth*, 278.

requirement for racial segregation in public schools, black Virginians were unable to mount a large enough opposition to stymie the momentum of white supremacy. Just as Carter Glass promised, “Discrimination!” would dictate white attitudes toward black Virginians for the next half-century.

After the 1902 convention, the conservative Democratic nucleus or “Organization” that had formed around party leader Thomas S. Martin pioneered a new strategy for the consolidation of political power; the result was a political machine that could rival any of the era. The new constitution instituted structural changes of state and local government, and Martin and his cronies exploited the changes to create a ring of power that relied upon patronage and a limited electorate. General Assembly representatives, judges, courthouse clerks, county officials, and Democratic party leaders were all “dependent upon one another for job security, salaries and election support.”⁶⁰ The conservative Democrats had launched their efforts of political consolidation in the early twentieth century ostensibly to curb black suffrage and implement racial segregation to “protect” the Commonwealth from the dangerous effects of interracial alliances. Two decades later, the party had long since achieved its stated goals, but was gaining momentum rather than losing it thanks to the ongoing efforts of the Democratic machine to continually perpetuate and empower itself.

WRVA was born at the moment that Harry Byrd and Virginia’s Democratic party were reinvigorating the causes of conservatism at the same time that they tentatively pursued modern reform efforts. William Reed’s close friend Harry Byrd inherited the machine in 1919 upon Martin’s death, and the young politician

⁶⁰ Ibid.

revitalized it.⁶¹ The Byrd machine – which Byrd himself preferred to call “the Organization” – dominated Virginia politics from the early 1920s until Byrd’s retirement in 1965. Ronald Heinemann argues that Byrd “desired for himself and for Virginia an environment with maximum opportunity and minimum limitations for the individuals. Government’s role in creating this environment was to be helpful and unobtrusive, a government that was ‘lean and mean,’ economical and efficient, with low taxes, few regulations, and competent services.”⁶² Pippa Holloway agrees that Byrd’s approach to government was heavily influenced by his commitment to business progressivism, but she demonstrates persuasively that the rhetoric about the autonomy of the individual and about “lean and mean” government rang hollow in the face of the expansive government regulation of sexual behavior in the Commonwealth in the 1920s and 1930s.⁶³ The Byrd machine relied upon rhetoric of economy and white racial privilege, as well as nearly invisible political decision-making. Writing in 1956, political reporter Douglass Cater claimed the machine was “unlike crude organizations of the Tammany type, [but] is supposed to be more comparable to a gentlemen’s club

⁶¹ Harry Byrd claimed the mantle of power in Virginia at the relatively young age of 32 when he took over from Martin in 1919. Byrd, who considered himself a blue-blooded descendent of the “First Families of Virginia,” including both William Byrd II and Pocahontas, had spent most of his early life near Winchester, Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley. His father was an apple farmer and the publisher of the *Winchester Star*, and Harry Byrd became familiar with both businesses. He inherited the *Winchester Star* at the age of 16 and pulled it out of debt. By age 21, he was the president of the Valley Turnpike Company and had the oversight of the turnpike that connected Winchester and Staunton. Seven years after first taking the position, Byrd leveraged his work for the Valley Turnpike Company into a Virginia Senate seat, which he assumed at age 28 in 1915. In comparison with many of Virginia’s delegates, Byrd was largely a self-made man, though he also emphasized his ties to the “First Families of Virginia.” For more about his early adulthood and political career, please see Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*.

⁶² Heinemann suggests Byrd’s model for success was the corporation. “He was a businessman who wanted a businesslike government.” Ronald L. Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 58.

⁶³ Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia*, 16.

which is bound together by ties of courtly tradition and subtle understanding.”⁶⁴

WRVA’s history illustrates the forces that bound white men and women to the Byrd machine, but also the limits of those binds. As solid as the Democratic Party appeared to be in the 1920s and 1930s, those people who were not benefitting from the arrangements – and most especially African Americans – were applying persistent pressure from the outside that would ultimately prove insurmountable.

Of course, conservatism in 1920s Virginia was not the sole domain of conservative Democrats. Although white supremacy – particularly in politics – was virtually guaranteed by the 1902 state constitution, a group of white “racial zealots,” to borrow historian Richard Sherman’s term, insisted on increased protections for the white race. “The race problem, they argued, was no longer political; it was biological.”⁶⁵ In the mid-1920s, racism took a new direction in Virginia and indeed throughout much of the United States. Drawing from theories of racialism, scientific racism, and eugenics, a cadre of white men launched a highly emotional crusade against racial mixing. Sherman argues that “the campaign for racial integrity in Virginia was not the product of a great popular ground swell,” but rather was “the work of this dedicated coterie of extremists who played effectively on the fears and prejudices of many whites.”⁶⁶

Members of this “coterie of extremists” included physician Walter Plecker, anthropologist Earnest Cox, and musician John Powell, the three of whom

⁶⁴ Douglass Cater, “Melodies from Byrdland,” *The Reporter* 25 (Nov. 9, 1961): 40.

⁶⁵ Richard B. Sherman, “The Last Stand: The Fight for Racial Integrity in Virginia in the 1920s,” *The Journal of Southern History* 54 (February 1988): 69-92, quotation on 69.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

founded the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America and established the club's "Post No. 1" in Richmond in September 1922.⁶⁷ According to one of its founders, the clubs were going to protect Anglo-Saxon ideals by "the strengthening of Anglo-Saxon instincts, traditions, and principles," as well as by the "intelligent selection and exclusion of immigrants," and through implementation of "fundamental and final solutions of our racial problems in general, most especially of our Negro problem."⁶⁸ In 1923, club leaders proposed legislation that would require all Virginia citizens to "register" their race or color, prohibit whites from marrying anyone other than whites, and legally define whiteness as "no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian."⁶⁹ Responding to the campaign for "racial integrity," as the proposal's proponents referred to it, the next General Assembly session "had a few things to say about the future of Virginia and Virginians."⁷⁰ The Assembly passed "An Act to Preserve Racial Integrity" that was almost no different from the plan originally proposed by the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America. Virginia's laws now classified anyone with just one drop of any non-white blood as non-white, and prohibited all interracial marriage in which one of the parties was legally "white" by the new, stricter definitions.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Ibid., 74.

⁶⁸ Powell expounded his views publicly and privately. The quotations above come from Anglo-Saxon Club publications as well as from private correspondence with WRVA owner William T. Reed. Richard B. Sherman, "The Last Stand," 74-75.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 75.

⁷⁰ Peter Wallenstein, *Cradle of America: Four Centuries of Virginia History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 298.

⁷¹ Interracial marriage had long been a crime in Virginia, but the tightening of the legal definition of "white" meant that some marriages which had previously been legal suddenly became illegal, creating no small amount of confusion. A quick note of interest: the Racial Integrity Act of 1924 stated that "No marriage license shall be granted until the clerk or deputy clerk has reasonable assurance that the statements as to color of both man and woman are correct." This was necessary so that the clerk could then determine whether the marriage could take place within the letter of the law. State laws banning interracial marriage were declared unconstitutional in

Pippa Holloway argues that the passage of the Racial Integrity Act was part of a larger moment in which the General Assembly gave the state government increased authority over and powers of intervention into the private lives of its citizens. Both the Racial Integrity Act and the Virginia Sterilization Statute, which permitted the sterilization of any resident of the state's four mental institutions, demonstrated local enthusiasm for eugenics "and a growing belief in the need for state regulation of sexual behavior" in 1924.⁷² This growing belief manifested itself in increased surveillance and censorship of public entertainment in Virginia, particularly regarding film. Holloway argues that white elites believed lower-class whites and Africans Americans to be "oversexed and lack[ing] self-restraint," and "the cultural context that constructed these groups as sexually dangerous worked in tandem with the political context that denied them the franchise."⁷³

The 1902 constitution had effectively stripped thousands of Virginians of their voting rights, but the 1924 General Assembly restricted the franchise even further by passing a law that restricted voting in the Democratic primaries to those persons who were classified as "white" according to the new legal definitions of race. In the one-party state, the Democratic primary was arguably the most important "election" of the cycle, and now the primary had an even

1967 with the landmark case *Loving v. Virginia*, but the state of Virginia still required people applying for marriage licenses to state their race on the application form as of 2007.

⁷² Pippa Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia*, 22. Historians Gregory Michael Dorr, Lisa Lindquist Dorr, and J. Douglas Smith also argue that the Racial Integrity Act and the Virginia Sterilization Statute derived from the same elite white fascination with eugenics as a form of social control. Gregory Michael Dorr, "Assuring America's Place in the Sun," *Journal of Southern History* 66 (May 2000): 257-296; Lisa Lindquist Dorr, "Arm in Arm: Gender, Eugenics, and Virginia's Racial Integrity Acts of the 1920s," *Journal of Women's History* 11 (Spring 1999): 143-166; Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*.

⁷³ Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia*, 2.

narrower electorate than the general election. Virginia's white elite had long been suspicious of working-class whites and African Americans, and especially of any causes that might unite the two. Despite several decades' worth of attempts to maintain the privileges of social and political power that they enjoyed, white elites were still sufficiently worried about the fragility of their system that they continued to seek new angles for control.

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When Larus and Brother Tobacco Company launched radio station WRVA, Richmonders speculated with excitement about its contribution to the community. Many people in Richmond and Virginia believed radio would benefit the region one way or another. Much was made of radio's usefulness to farmers and shut-ins, educators and preachers. Radio waves could connect people who were otherwise separated geographically and socially: spiritual leaders could enlarge their flock, farmers could access the latest market reports, and rural Virginians could listen to the most "refined" music produced in American cities. Like many Americans of the 1920s, Richmonders believed that radio would provide cultural and moral "uplift" for the community, a belief that Larus and Brother Company took great pains to encourage.

The morning of November 2, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* claimed, "for radio fans all over the city and State, [WRVA's debut] will be one of the most exciting nights in the history of broadcast. For those all over the country – perhaps Canada and Mexico – it will mean just one more station to log and one

more city to remember.”⁷⁴ The newspaper puts its finger on one of the most thrilling aspects of WRVA’s launch into the ether: it would not only be fun for local listeners, but it would also make Richmond a “city to remember.”

For several decades, city boosters had declared that Richmond was on the road to twentieth-century prosperity and prestige, and there seemed to be some evidence to support these claims. Richmond’s position on several major railroad lines brought the city’s businessmen into close contact with national markets and industry. Increased manufacturing, marketing, and distribution on a national scale kept goods and money flowing into and out of the city at an impressive speed, and Richmond’s economy weathered “busts” better than most areas of the country. In particular, an increase in demand for cigarettes during and after the First World War led to the explosion of the tobacco industry and a resulting boom in profit for anyone who had invested in it. In the decade following the war, Virginia farmers and businessmen enjoyed unprecedented sales with record-breaking profits that rose with each subsequent year.⁷⁵ The fortunes of the state seemed to be on the rise after the economic and social chaos of the late nineteenth century.

WRVA’s opening night broadcast channeled the optimism of the decade, but it also dragged along the baggage of white elite paternalism. William Reed and other Larus executives maintained that they had created WRVA in order to elevate the city and the state. Taking its cue from Reed, the *Richmond News*

⁷⁴ “Broadcasting Station Makes Official Bow Here Tonight,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Nov. 2, 1925.

⁷⁵ Cassandra Tate, *Cigarette Wars: The Triumph of the ‘Little White Slaver’* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 65-92.

Leader editorialized on the station's opening day that "Everyone should regard [WRVA] as a channel for co-operative service in the interest of Richmond and for the city's sake."⁷⁶ From its first day on the air, WRVA committed itself to a civic mission that was partially informed by the national enthusiasm for the possibilities of radio, and partially informed by the conservative forces of Virginia politics that revered stability, deference, and hierarchy. The station would reiterate its commitment to uplift innumerable times over the next several decades, but WRVA's operators were not the only ones hoping to use the station for "uplift." Once on the air, broadcasters' intent became programming, policies became sounds, and listeners became an audience with preferences and opinions. On a clear, cool night in November 1925, WRVA announced its decision to "better" Virginia and its people with the new miracle technology of radio. As it turned out, listeners of all races and creeds were hoping for the same thing. But as they would all discover, "uplift" was a highly subjective enterprise with an uncertain resolution.

⁷⁶ "WRVA and Its Operators," *Richmond News Leader*, Nov. 2, 1925.

Chapter 1

“Down Where the South Begins”: Sounds of Confusion

At the close of WRVA's first test broadcast on Oct. 21, 1925, two weeks before its official launch, station “hostess” Bertha Hewlett ended the evening with a rendition of “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” on the piano. For the next fifty years or so, “Carry Me Back” was the station's official sign-off number.¹ Written in the 1880s by a black musician named James Bland, the song gained widespread popularity in the early to mid-twentieth century.² Something about the song, in which “this old darke’y” expressed great love for working the land in Virginia's Dismal Swamp “where I labored so hard for old massa,” seemed to resonate with many different kinds of Americans. The song mythologized constructed memories of white paternalism, where an old black man reflects upon his life and masters with affection.³ White audiences in both the Northeast and in the former Confederacy shared “nostalgia for an idyllic antebellum South” that featured contented slaves with simple desires.⁴ Even more broadly

¹ CD-554: “Bertha Hewlett Interview, unknown interviewer, [1975],” WRVA Radio Collection, 1925-2000, Business records collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Hereafter cited as LVA: WRVA Radio.

² Lyrics to “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” as recorded in Chris Goertzen, “Mrs. Joe Person's Popular Airs: Early Blackface Minstrelsy Tunes in Oral Tradition,” *Ethnomusicology* 35 (Winter 1991): 31-53.

³ Robert Toll argued that Bland's songs, and particularly “Carry Me Back,” “were free from antislavery protests and from praise of freedom,” thereby rendering them palatable to a white audience. He suggests that, in general, Bland's “nostalgic Old Darkies express[ing] great love for their masters and mistresses” resembled stock blackface characters. Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 251.

⁴ Lee Glazer and Susan Key argue that songs such as “Carry Me Back” were attractive to white, middle-class northern audiences, and proved to be imminently marketable. “Neither literal nor figurative distance interfered with the ability of Northern, middle-class composer and audience to identify with the ‘old darkey’: real-life experience was unnecessary to either the production or the enjoyment of nostalgia for the Old South.” Moreover, they argue, “the Old South that seemed to

speaking, "Carry Me Back's" pastoral imagery sated an emerging desire on the part of many Americans to find something authentically American and authentically preindustrial to help balance the massive transformations of the late nineteenth century.⁵ Even as the song caricatured slavery, however, the narrator has a dignity and strength about him that blackface – and Jim Crow laws – generally denied African American men.⁶ The song presented a highly variable interpretation of race, or ridicule, of resistance, and of love. When WRVA adopted the ballad as its signature song in 1925, it incorporated all the complexities of race and southern nostalgia into its very foundation.⁷

The three years between the station's inauguration and its first experiment with commercial network broadcasting was a critical period in the station's history. From late 1925 until Jan. 15, 1929, when WRVA formally joined the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) network, WRVA officials were responsible for nearly every second of coverage at the non-commercial station.⁸ They had promised to bring uplift for the area, to boost the fortunes of Richmond

have been invented after the Civil War as a response to historical conditions in fact merely appropriated historical conditions to enhance a pre-existing myth of stability in the midst of threatening change." Lee Glazer and Susan Key, "Carry Me Back: Nostalgia for the Old South in Nineteenth-Century Popular Culture," *Journal of American Studies* 30 (April 1996): 1-24, quotations from 1, 2, 23.

⁵ Jackson Lears identifies the 1880s, the same decade in which James Bland first published this song, as the beginning of a widespread, committed movement of antimodernism. T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

⁶ It was perhaps for this reason that the "Tuskegee Quintette" sang the song when they went on tour, and Virginia State College's football team incorporated the song into their pregame rituals. "News of the Nation's Capital! Tuskegee Quintette Renders Delightful Programme at the Metropolitan A.M.E." *Indianapolis Freeman*, July 24, 1915. "Jefferson's boys came here today singing 'Carry Me Back to Old Virginia,' and when they had departed, South Carolina State was down, 20 to 7." Ric Roberts, "Va. State Trounces S.C. State, 20-7," *Topeka Plaindealer*, Nov. 29, 1936, 6.

⁷ This chapter draws upon some portions of my Master's thesis about the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*. See Caroline Chandler Morris, "Down Where the South Begins': Virginia Radio and the Conversation of Nationhood," MA Thesis, *College of William and Mary*, 2005.

⁸ Memorandum, "WRVA Milestones." LVA: WRVA Radio.

and Virginia, and now they had to translate that promise into *sound*, and those sounds would all come at their own expense. WRVA's early programming decisions illustrate the ways in which the station's owner and operators interpreted the mission of uplift, and sought to provide programming that would appeal to a broad audience while simultaneously promoting the officials' own values. To do this, station officials took older performance traditions and adapted them for radio, repeating and recasting unresolved questions of southern identity, citizenship, religion, and racial inequality in a new context. But even as they trotted out blackface, "old-time" music, gospel choirs, and hillbilly jokes – all of which would have been familiar to the station's Virginia audience – they were creating the space for new and revised interpretations of what "the South" was, and how it was changing in a new era.

From the beginning, WRVA described itself both on-air and off-air as being the voice from "Down Where the South Begins,"⁹ launching the station squarely into highly publicized debates of the 1920s about regional identity, the relative merits of rural and urban values, and the pace of modernization. Being "down where the South begins," WRVA was on a threshold: regionally, culturally, politically, and perhaps temporally as well. The earliest programming to issue forth from this threshold reflected the confusion of a group of middle- and upper-class white men (and indeed also of many Americans) who were overwhelmed by the complexity of early-twentieth-century American life, and by their inability to reduce the chaos into a series of manageable binaries. The boundaries between

⁹ The official station title was The Edgeworth Radio Station: "Down Where the South Begins." Most written materials from the station conveyed this slogan in its earliest years, and it was also repeated daily on the air.

black and white, urban and rural, and men and women were increasingly blurred, even as modern Americans struggled to reinforce them.¹⁰ WRVA's slogan was one symptom of this confusion: what ended where "the South" began? and if "the South" began at WRVA, or perhaps in Richmond, where did it end? was "the South" a place, a sound, a way of life, a time period? By placing themselves on a threshold, WRVA officials turned the radio station into an osmotic membrane through which unresolved debates about the past, present, and future flowed back and forth, alternately comingling and separating, concentrating and diluting. Equilibrium became increasingly elusive as the realities of life in a modern South no longer squared with the systems of control that were supposed to govern it.

"Modern" and "traditional," though often cast as a binary by my historical actors, are not distinct entities in this story. When WRVA went on the air, station officials proudly declared themselves to be emissaries of a new and transformative communications technology – something that was inherently modern. At the same time, they sought to infuse their programming with the alleged sounds of tradition, creating a certain amount of confusion as to whether, "down where the South begins," folks were more interested in the [imagined] comforts of the past or the thrills of the present. The confusion of the sound, of course, reflected the contradiction of the opposition. "Old-time" radio shows were

¹⁰ Queer studies can help us understand both the articulation of binaries in the twentieth century, as well as transgression of them. For example, John Howard has shown that although dominant society and culture in the twentieth-century South reinforced and sometimes created cultural binaries, there were also always people and behaviors that flouted them. In *Men Like That*, his monograph about queer men and nonconformist gender behavior in Mississippi, Howard argues that queer identities and behaviors disrupted binaries of homosexuality/heterosexuality, man/woman, and public/private. John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999). See xvii-xviii in particular.

an oxymoron in the late 1920s. WRVA began by broadcasting programs like the *Farm Report*, the *Sunshine Hour*, the *Four Deuces*, and the *Edgeworth Negro Chorus* – all of which used the new technology to address concerns or to entertain in a manner that was consistent with the concerns and desires of pre-World War I Virginians. The *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, which emerged at the end of this era of experimentation and quickly became WRVA's most famous program of the 1930s, however, reflected the officials' desire and instinct to modernize traditional forms of entertainment into a new genre, which ultimately exposed the contradictions of southern systems of race and class in the second quarter of the twentieth century much more than it resolved them. Indeed, once WRVA became part of a national network in 1929, audience response suggested that the new genre was not only reflecting transformations of regional identity, but was also playing a critical part in the formation of a modern, national identity.

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When station manager Calvin Lucy steered WRVA out of port, he later reflected that "radio was still a 'gee whiz' word."¹¹ Towers had been built, microphones installed, licenses had been applied for and received, the public had been courted. But then the real work began. Lucy and his team had two main objectives: to make the station economically viable, and to produce sounds that people wanted to hear. In the mid-1920s, there were not many models of "broadcasting," and almost none that were profitable. The term did not have anything to do with radio until 1921 or so, and even then its meaning was

¹¹ *WRVA's 25th Anniversary*, VCU: Lucy Papers

unclear.¹² Looking back on his career, Calvin Lucy often described his cohort as “radio pioneers,” and it was not false modesty.¹³ WRVA officials must have felt like they were flying by the seat of their pants those first few years of broadcasting, because they were.

Larus and Brother’s press releases announcing the birth of WRVA signaled the station’s intent to pursue broadcasting on a non-commercial basis. Although some radio technicians were experimenting with technology that would make station-to-station “hook-ups” possible, thus laying the groundwork for network broadcasting and massive advertising campaigns, it was not necessarily the direction in which radio was headed in 1925. As Robert McChesney, Susan Smulyan, and many others have shown, there was never a general consensus whether consolidated, commercialized, national networks would best serve American interests.¹⁴ In the mid-1920s, listeners twirling the dial were as likely to hear priests, teachers, college students, or farmers as they were big city orchestras or variety shows. WRVA did not intend to operate on a nonprofit

¹² “Broadcasting” had had a primarily agricultural connotation until the 1920s, and referred to the act of sowing seeds to maximize seed germination and crop spacing. The *New York Times* first used the word in a radio context in June 1921 to describe the transmission of the upcoming Dempsey-Carpentier boxing match. The Navy Signal Bureau sent accounts of the fight to pre-determined amateur wireless transmitters, who then sent the updates out to other wireless transmitters, who in turn sent them out into the ether. The overall effect conjured up the image of one farmer *broadcasting* many seeds in a field, and thus the name. “Navy Signal Bureau Gets Ready to ‘Flash’ News,” *New York Times*, June 18, 1921.

¹³ Lucy’s biography in WRVA’s 25th Anniversary booklet in 1950 describes him as a “pioneer radio broadcaster.” A few years later, Lucy was invited to help oversee the “Pioneer Radio History Project.” See *WRVA’s 25th Anniversary*, VCU: Lucy Papers. See also Memorandum, “Broadcast Pioneers Information,” VCU: Lucy Papers.

¹⁴ Robert McChesney’s pathbreaking book, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy* traces the ways in which a coalition of critics organized in opposition to the commercial radio system (i.e. the “American system”), working hard to make provisions that supported nonprofit or noncommercial radio even after the passage of the network-friendly Communications Act of 1934. Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935* (New York: Oxford University Press 1993). See also Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

basis, but it was not looking to advertise on behalf of others for revenue, either. Like other stations owned by newspapers, or car dealerships, or department stores, WRVA's *raison d'être* was to generate favorable publicity for the owners' primary enterprise, not to generate profits in their own right.¹⁵

WRVA began life as a non-commercial radio station, but make no mistake: it had been created as an advertising venture to boost Larus and Brother's profits. Initially, company executive William Reed conceived of the "Edgeworth Tobacco Station" as one giant advertisement for smoking tobacco. Larus & Brother would pay for the station much like it paid for full-page magazine ads. The hope was that listeners would approve so highly of the radio programs that they listened to – many of which reinforced pipe-smoking – that they would become loyal consumers of Larus products, such as Edgeworth pipe tobacco. Or perhaps they would be so impressed by Larus's selfless service to the community that they would favor the company with their custom. The lure of radio, with its ability to reach thousands of households for one fixed price, was a powerful temptation for the tobacco executives. Richmond may have had a foot in the past, but Tobacco Row looked to the future. Richmond's tobacco manufacturers had been at the forefront of the modern advertising boom, and it made sense that a tobacco firm built one of Virginia's first radio stations as an advertising venture.¹⁶ Its success would rest on the WRVA team's ability to sell a sound rather than a product.

¹⁵ McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy*, 14.

¹⁶ Another Richmond tobacco firm, Allen & Ginter, had pioneered the practice of including "cigarette cards" in the 1880s, an advertising stunt that soon caught the eye of eventual tobacco tycoon James B. Duke of North Carolina. The cards were arranged in a topical series, and

In the beginning, almost any cheap and available sound was a good sound. Even better if it was impromptu and adaptable. Station manager Calvin Lucy would have laughed in the winter of 1925-1926 if someone had requested a program listing for more than a few days in advance. When WRVA started, they were broadcasting only twice a week in the evenings, and did not fill a daytime schedule until June 1926.¹⁷ The original point, after all, was to advertise the tobacco, not necessarily to become a fixture of communication. But nevertheless, patterns developed in the sorts of programs that WRVA would offer its listeners above and beyond exhortations to purchase Edgeworth tobacco products. By the end of its second year on the air, a common soundscape emerged: the “Voice of Virginia” was full of nostalgia for rural life, a reverence for “tradition,” and a peculiar understanding of the past. Richmond’s most modern technological innovation was born looking backwards into an imagined, collective past.

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In the first two years of broadcasting, the emphasis was not on regular programs that ran in convenient 15-minute segments, but on variety and experimentation. To fill the allotted broadcasting hours, WRVA ran line-ups of local amateur fiddlers, prayers and hymns, hillbilly jamborees, black gospel singers, community glee clubs, orchestras, and farm reports. Everything from organ recitals to one-act plays to political addresses made it onto the air in the first two years of broadcasting, and an internal memo on the eve of the station’s

customers were encouraged to collect all cards in a set. The scheme proved profitable and the firm was eventually worth millions.

¹⁷ *WRVA: Serving You for 50 Golden Years* ([Richmond, VA]: n. p., 1975).

second anniversary proudly claimed that the station had put on 672 programs with 20,000 different people taking part.¹⁸

WRVA's kitchen-sink strategy gave officials time to assess their abilities as broadcasters as well as audience preferences. On their one-year anniversary broadcast on Nov. 2, 1926, they asked themselves what radio audiences really wanted, and answered their own question: we don't know.

The jazz hounds resent church music. The popular music of today does not find approval among those who like classics. Many people cannot understand why country fiddlers are allowed to broadcast at all when their individual tastes are running in a groove of hearing only the jazz orchestra play. Students of psychology or those who wish to study human nature would find a radio audience a fine field for research.¹⁹

In the early years, most of the programming decisions were guesswork, heavily influenced by the preferences of the broadcasters themselves. Almost all of the station's employees were up-and-coming white men from the area, and their personal and professional decisions often reflected a deep sense of white male paternalism. The "Old South," Protestant religion, and local music – from the city and the county, from black musicians and white musicians – dominated programs designed for entertainment or casual listening. The most successful contributors gradually formalized their acts into regular programs like H.C. Cline's *Market Reports* and Holland Wilkinson's *Sunshine Hour*. The first few years, WRVA hired performers based on availability and price more than talent, but listener mail helped station officials separate the wheat from the chaff, and gradually a few rose to the top, providing WRVA with a signature sound.

¹⁸ "Two Year Review of WRVA, ending Nov. 2, 1927," VCU: Lucy Papers.

¹⁹ Transcript of one-year anniversary introduction [Nov. 2, 1926], VCU: Lucy Papers.

From November 27, 1925 until his death in September 1939, H.C. Cline delivered daily market reports for Virginia farmers on WRVA. His show, initially known simply as *Market Reports* before adopting the less businesslike title of *Virginia Farm and Home Hour*, was devoted to serving the needs of farming folk as far as the transmitter could reach. Cline, known on-air as the “farmer’s friend,” was described as “a genuine farmer whose crops out in [nearby] Chesterfield County are the envy of many of his neighbors.” The article described Cline as having “the interest of the rural dwellers completely at heart. His native homely philosophy aids in making him welcome as soon as he enters the studios.”²⁰ Cline’s daily farm reports included the going rates for livestock and crops, as well as weather forecasts and the occasional song or joke to keep the mood light. The program generally aired at or around the noon hour so farmers who had come home for lunch could listen in, and before long Cline had one of the most devoted followings of any early WRVA program.²¹

While WRVA may have been the first high-powered station that Virginia farmers could turn to for market and weather reports in the late 1920s, it was not the first station to offer them. Since the early 1920s, a wide spectrum of people – academics, engineers, politicians, and even farmers themselves – had advocated the benefits of radio for farmers. The same year that H.C. Cline launched his daily farm report, the president of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), a “onetime farm boy” named General Harbord speculated that “perhaps the greatest utility of radio to the farmer is in tying in with the extension work of

²⁰ *WRVA Dialog*, May 1939, VCU: Lucy Papers.

²¹ Cline’s program was the longest-running feature on WRVA when the station began broadcasting at 50,000 watts in 1939. *The Sunshine Hour* was the second-oldest. *Ibid.*

agricultural schools.” Through radio, Harbord argued, “the farmer receives the advice of agricultural authorities,” and was therefore theoretically able to conduct his business with the latest agricultural innovations.²² Having up-to-date information could result in immediate gain, as illustrated in an anecdote in *Radio Broadcast* about a farmer who outwitted a hog-buyer with the help of the 11AM market quotations.²³

According to much of the literature, radio was supposed to do more for farmers than anyone else in the United States. Randall Patnode has argued that radio boosters used the image of the farmer “to promote the value of radio for all Americans.” He suggests that “farmers were depicted by the popular press as ideally positioned to profit from what radio did best: bridge large distances and provide an abundance of information and amusement.”²⁴ Radio was not only supposed to update *farming*; it was also supposed to update the *farmer*. Most of the writers for the periodical press assumed that farmers were hopelessly backward, having been denied the greatest benefits of higher civilization. Radio was going to help them bridge the gap between their out-of-date, isolated lives and the thrills and ideas of the modern city. The condescension was naked and pervasive in the 1920s, as Patnode aptly demonstrates in his survey of the popular press. Farms and farmers were the imagined subjects of a project of civilization.

²² David Lewis Cohn, *The Good Old Days: A History of American Manners and Morals as seen through the Sears Roebuck Catalogs, 1905 to the present* (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 47. Reprinted from New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940.

²³ John Wallace, “What the Farmer Listens To,” *Radio Broadcast* 9 (August 1926): 316-317, anecdote on 316.

²⁴ Randall Patnode, “What These People Need Is Radio’: New Technology, the Press, and Otherness in 1920s American,” *Technology and Culture* 44, (2003): 285-305, quotation from 285.

Up-to-date market information was undoubtedly useful for farmers in Virginia and elsewhere, but the project of civilization that many industry commentators imagined was more fantasy than fact. Radio did indeed bring sounds of the city into country homes, but the transaction was not a one-way mission of mercy and colonization. By deliberately reserving a portion of the schedule for the interests of farming folk, who made their preferences known via applause memos and postcards, radio stations like WRVA were intentionally incorporating rural people and rural interests into the emerging radio culture.²⁵ In doing so, the “Voice of Virginia” included sounds of rural Virginians as well as urban Virginians, sidestepping the rhetorical rural-urban binary that fascinated many Americans of the 1920s. Perhaps even more critically, in the case of WRVA, the “sounds of the land,” as Pete Daniel has called them, and the sounds of the city were not so different, suggesting that the binary may even have been false.²⁶

Farmers were an acknowledged and welcome portion of WRVA’s audience, but farms themselves were even more important to the station’s early broadcasting. Or, more specifically, the imagined spaces of farms and plantations. Grace Hale has argued that, in the early-twentieth-century South, history became the canvas on which white southerners painted their racialized and gendered authority. In the hands of anxious white southerners, many of

²⁵ In their 1935 synthesis of radio scholarship, researchers Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport claimed that several radio surveys from the early 1930s (and possibly earlier) indicated that fan mail tended to be “heavily weighted by listeners in the lower economic classes and in nonurban areas.” Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport, *The Psychology of Radio* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 95.

²⁶ See Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.)

whom were part of an emerging urban middle class, southern history became “a strangely other time and space within which first to deny and escape the present and then to reconstruct the foundations of racial difference.”²⁷ Nostalgia, often invoked through images of farm or plantation life as in “Carry Me Back,” was the implement with which many people wrote “‘history’ as the autobiography of southern whiteness.”²⁸ Some of WRVA’s earliest variety programs bear out Hale’s argument; the old-time, bucolic settings for some of the station’s most popular programs pandered heavily in white nostalgia for the Old South, and in so doing contributed to the project of race-making that Grace Hale, George Lipsitz, and Alexander Saxton have identified in their work.²⁹ Radio in general, however, and sound in particular could not be easily segregated and compartmentalized, and the early variety programs unintentionally undermined the discourse of whiteness that they were joining.

Most of WRVA’s musicians were amateurs in the late 1920s, and none more so than the cast of the *Four Deuces*. The “deuces” were all members of station manager Calvin Lucy’s family, with Lucy himself in the lead.³⁰ The show

²⁷ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 44.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Grace Hale, *Making Whiteness*; George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, new ed. (New York: Verso, 2003).

³⁰ The show’s announcer, Bob Beadles, referred to the four “Deuces” as C.T., Honey, Dook, and Lee. “C.T.” no doubt refers to Calvin Lucy, “Honey” was Lucy’s sister, and Lee may have been his younger brother. As for Dook, he was most likely a third Lucy brother. Lucy refers to “Honey” as “Sis” in the scripts, indicating that she was either his sister, or possibly his sister-in-law. During Calvin Lucy’s childhood, his grandmother wrote to her daughter Blanche often about “sweet little Lee” or “cute little Lee,” who seemed to tag along behind “big and able Calvin.” Letters to Calvin H. and Blanche T. Lucy, 1906-1923. Lucy Family Papers, 1883-2005, Personal Papers Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Hereafter cited as LVA: Lucy Family Papers.

was neither revolutionary nor sophisticated, but it filled time for the station at no cost, and attracted a positive enough response from listeners. Before network broadcasting, most radio entertainment shows were improvised and live. Throughout most of the 1920s, if a radio station wanted to play a sound recording, they more or less positioned the microphone right over a phonograph. Unsurprisingly, sound quality was poor, and listeners complained. By comparison, live performances offered crisp, fresh sounds, and listeners felt as though they were part of the performance, just as if they were sitting next to the musicians. It was in this spirit of intimacy that Lucy and his family adopted a rural, nostalgic tone for their monthly variety show.

The *Four Deuces* focused mainly on popular songs, minstrel ballads, and “old-timey” music, but also included good-natured if unoriginal jokes.³¹ Unlike the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, WRVA’s most popular variety show to come out of this era, the *Four Deuces* did not incorporate blackface directly into the act, though the performers did play minstrel tunes like “Root, Hog, or Die.”³² The show, rather, featured Calvin Lucy’s white family, narrating their way through “Favorites of yesterday” as they reminisced about moonlit nights on the river, young love, and

³¹ The mélange of genres that the *Four Deuces* employed suggests that the compartmentalization of southern music by race and by region that Karl Miller suggests in *Segregating Sound* was either incomplete or not fully transferrable to radio. Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

³² It is impossible to know which rendition of “Root, Hog, or Die” the *Four Deuces* performed, but a 1928 compilation of minstrel songs includes a version of the song in which a black man from “Old Virginny” confronts life in Boston with a great deal of confusion. The chorus employs the classic vocabulary and racialized sentimentality of a minstrel tune: “I’s de happiest darkee on de top ob de earth/ I get fat as possum in de time ob de dearth,/ Like a pig in a tater patch, dar let me lie,/ Way down in old Virginny, where it’s Root, hog, or die.” Dailey Paskman and Sigmund Spaeth, *Gentlemen, Be Seated!: A Parade of the Old-Time Minstrels* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1928), 45-47.

neighborliness.³³ Lucy usually played the melody on his guitar while his brothers and sister accompanied him on mandolins, with everyone chipping in for the ribbing in between sets. The mandolin, wildly popular around the turn of the century, was losing its position as a fad instrument by the mid-1920s, having been replaced by the bolder sound of the brass instruments that jazz musicians favored. Initially hailed by professional and amateur musicians as the perfect “new” instrument for teaching young students classical music, the mandolin had declined in popularity among urban musicians, but had attracted a new audience among those who played rural music like hillbilly, bluegrass, or the emerging genre of “old-time” folk music.³⁴ When the quartet challenged listeners to travel back in time a bit during their half-hour show, both the instruments and the content enhanced the fantasy.

Time was a tricky concept on the *Four Deuces*, where definitions of times such as “past,” yesterday,” and “old” were fluid and vague. In one script from the late 1920s, after the Deuces sang “Way Down in Old Virginny,” announcer Bob Beadles introduced the “musical Radio Farce” entitled “Moonstruck on a Moonlight down the James in AD 1910” that the singing quartet would put on that night.³⁵ He set the scene by inviting the unseen radio audience onto a boat with the Deuces, so they could take a musical journey together:

³³ Transcript of *Four Deuces*. LVA: Lucy Family Papers. See also scrapbook pages from Lucy’s personal scrapbook. Includes clipping from a WRVA publication referring to the *Four Deuces* as being “composed of members of the Lucy family.” Calvin T. Lucy, Sr., scrapbook, LVA: Lucy Family Papers.

³⁴ Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

³⁵ I believe strongly that the show is from the mid- to late-1920s because WRVA would have had network programs by 1929, and Lucy’s administrative capacity would have become so great that it would have been difficult for him to also act as an entertainer. Furthermore, looking back on his

The old side wheeler “Pocahontas”, which must have been christened by John Smith himself rests snugly at its berth in the Richmond Harbor, a glaze of light, and a scene of enthusiasm and restrained merrymaking as the crowd files slowly aboard for its nightly trip down the James River to Dutch Gap of Civil War Fame, and return...³⁶

Over the course of one (admittedly long) sentence, Beadles moved the listeners between 1910, the first decade of the seventeenth century, and the era of the Civil War.³⁷ The “old side wheeler” they traveled on was reminiscent of water transportation of the late antebellum period, but the boat was called “Pocahontas” and was so old it “must have been christened by John Smith himself.” The program played with time as though it was nonlinear, an approach that became a hallmark of many other WRVA programs in the 1920s and beyond.

This is not to say that the *Four Deuces* ignored the present. Between musical numbers on one program, Beadles quipped, “it sure is terrible how these youngsters will carry on, and with the speed of Lindbergh we find him demonstrating just why they wrote ‘Put Your Arms Around Me Honey.’”³⁸ At this, the Deuces jumped right in and played the song, sentimentalizing the amorous endeavors of these “terrible” youngsters and tacitly condoning the act of public canoodling. By setting modern behavior like dating in an older setting, the Deuces were both controlling it and reconfiguring it. The past was not perfect, but neither was the present, and the *Four Deuces* poked fun at the sillier aspects

career, he did not note any moments at the microphone after those memorable instances in 1926 and 1927 when he broadcast Coolidge and Lindbergh, etc.

³⁶ Transcript, Calvin T. Lucy, Sr., LVA: Lucy Family Papers.

³⁷ It is worth pointing out, perhaps, that the Union forces lost the Battle of Dutch Gap.

³⁸ Transcript, Calvin T. Lucy, Sr., LVA: Lucy Family Papers.

of each in an effort to find a comfortable position in the present. No matter how complete the illusion of timelessness, however, the radio set in the corner would have been a constant if passive reminder to the listener that the *Four Deuces* was a modern product.

The *Four Deuces* was only one of a number of acts performed in-house with free labor that began airing semi-regularly on WRVA in its non-commercial years. Soon after the station went on the air, in response to listener requests for hymns, Holland Wilkinson volunteered his services for a devotional program that ultimately became a regular feature called *The Sunshine Hour*.³⁹ For an hour several times each week, Wilkinson sang old hymns while station “hostess” Bertha Hewlett accompanied him on piano; neither was paid for this work.⁴⁰ In between songs Wilkinson, who had lost his legs in a trolley accident as a young boy, offered messages of uplift and hope that were so well-received the *Richmond News Leader* offered him a weekly newspaper column.⁴¹ His popularity grew with the regularization of his radio show and newspaper column, and in 1949, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* wrote that “in certain Eastern States, his name is a synonym for cheer and hope.” After Wilkinson’s death in 1955, letters of condolence and requests for *Sunshine Hour* recordings poured into the studio. A couple years later, listener Dick Gillis recalled Wilkinson’s influence in rural Brunswick County:

³⁹ *The Sunshine Hour* debuted on March 28, 1927, but Wilkinson had already been doing radio broadcasts for WRVA for several months. Holland Reid Wilkinson, *The Sunshine Hour: Devotionals in Story and Song* (Nashville, TN: Cokesbury Press, 1929), 8-9.

⁴⁰ I cannot be certain how often the program aired, but Wilkinson’s 1929 book indicated that *The Sunshine Hour* had aired 291 times in roughly the first three years.

⁴¹ The first column ran on September 7, 1927. Holland Reid Wilkinson, *The Sunshine Hour*, 8-9.

He was a mainstay on this station for many years. And speaking of mainstays, 'nother thing that WRVA has done so well. You've never overlooked the spiritual side of radio; you've always carried your church services and your ministers have had access to your microphones. And that meant a lot to us down in Brunswick County.⁴²

While the *Four Deuces* used romantic imagery and sentimental ballads to appeal to listeners' nostalgia for the "Old South," Wilkinson charmed listeners with old-time religion and plain-spoken faith. In the foreword to his devotional hymnal, Wilkinson suggested that radio could be a magical device for the devoted. "The hymns of Zion, how they are loved!" "How much the radio has meant to [shut-ins and sick folk] in giving them the worth-while things of life will never be known. The church services that they have missed and longed for are now theirs."⁴³

During its first few years of broadcasting, WRVA discovered that "the spiritual side of radio," as Dick Gillis put it, could attract large numbers of devoted listeners. Radio preachers were something of a fad in the mid to late 1920s, as well-spoken ministers used radio broadcasts to expand their flocks. The *New York Times* remarked in 1928 that while listening to a sermon on the radio was not the same thing as experiencing a worship service, "it [the radio sermon] must have a mighty influence in turning the thoughts of vast numbers of isolated individuals toward the higher things of life, the spiritual experiences and ends of existence."⁴⁴ *The Sunshine Hour* was more of an intimate chat with a friendly pastor than a sermon, but WRVA believed the effect to be the same. The inclusion of religious programming seemed to fill the civic mission the station had outlined at its conception. WRVA had initially dedicated itself to serving the

⁴² CD-119: "Dick Gillis and C.T. Lucy, Interview, 2 November 1957," LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁴³ Holland Reid Wilkinson, *The Sunshine Hour*, 7-8.

⁴⁴ "Radio and Religion," *New York Times*, Oct. 14, 1928, E4.

public interests, and since most of its officials were churchgoing men it is not a stretch to imagine they felt on-air hymns and devotionals did exactly that.⁴⁵

Most radio stations aired some form of religious programming in the early years of broadcasting, most often on Sundays, but WRVA went above and beyond. From prayers and hymn-singing at dawn to *The Sunshine Hour* in the afternoon to the *Dixie Spiritual Singers* in the evening, God had prime real estate on the “Voice of Virginia.” The 1920s saw a surge of defensive religion, especially among white southerners. Partly in response to the perceived ascendance of secular culture in America, Christian fundamentalism emerged as a force of anti-modernism. In the summer of 1925, just months before WRVA went on the air, the John T. Scopes trial in Tennessee became a media spectacle in which Christian fundamentalism lashed out quixotically at the encroachment of modern science. Coverage of the trial – which included substantial radio transmission – was largely unfavorable to the conservative religious orthodoxy of (in this case) white southerners. Rather than revise southerners’ faith in the face of widespread criticism and ridicule, however, “the controversy made resistance to modernism an even more integral part of

⁴⁵ Religious leaders were among the first people to realize the potential of radio to reach across space. A large number of “radio preachers” used the new technology to reach far beyond their congregations. Some, like Holland Wilkinson, offered devotional programming. Others, most notably Father Charles Coughlin of Chicago, adopted an activist approach to radio, using the technology as a loudspeaker for social and political debates. Radio preachers of all stripes enjoyed substantial support from the American public, and listeners often proclaimed delight that a new technology could elevate the position of religion – almost always Christianity – in a modern era. “Can the radio, which brings us reports and faithful representations of wind and earthquake and fire, bring us also the ‘still small voice’ of God?” asked Spencer Miller in a 1935 issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. He answered his own question, “Not only has ‘radio religion’ become a fact, but the radio has become one of the most significant mediums by which the leaders of various communions have not only multiplied their voices but also vastly increased their congregations.” Spencer Miller, Jr., “Radio and Religion,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 177 (January 1935): 35-40. Quotations from 35, 36.

Southern religion and culture.”⁴⁶ Across much of the early to mid-century South, many people looked to religion to defend against some of the very innovations that radio promised to bring to the hinterlands: urban music (white southerners were particularly skeptical of jazz), secular entertainment, and bawdy humor.

Rather than pit religion against radio, or promote old-time religion at the expense of contemporary music, WRVA had heavy doses of both. The radio station did not give itself wholly over to modern entertainment, but nor was its religious programming reactionary. *The Sunshine Hour's* old-time religion was supposed to be uplifting; not frightening. Its message was of hope and progress, not repentance and condemnation. WRVA broadcast old-time religious hymns, but without the tone of anti-modernism. On WRVA, old-time religion and secular entertainment cohabitated without friction, despite contemporary social commentary about traditional religion and modern, secular entertainment being locked in a death match.

Holland Wilkinson was a white man, but old-time religion was not solely the purview of white performers during WRVA's earliest years. According to literature published by the station several decades later on the occasion of WRVA's anniversary, a group of African American men who sang in a choir, referred to as both the Edgeworth Negro Chorus and the Dixie Spiritual Singers, were among WRVA's most popular performers.⁴⁷ The choir was composed of black employees from the Larus & Brother Company plant on Tobacco Row in

⁴⁶ “Modernist Controversy,” in Samuel S. Hill and Charles H. Lippy, eds., *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*, 2nd ed., (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 513-516.

⁴⁷ Walter R. Bishop, *WRVA Radio, 35 Years* (Richmond, Va.: [WRVA Radio?], 1960), 3.

Richmond, and WRVA managers were self-congratulatory about their choice to air the black singers.⁴⁸

Precious few records remain documenting the Edgeworth Negro Chorus, and it is possible that the station erased much of their history, either intentionally or unintentionally.⁴⁹ It is clear, however, that in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the singing group was a critical component of the WRVA schedule. Unlike either Holland Wilkinson's hymns or the folksy humor of the *Four Deuces*, "traditional" black music had been a part of the station's inaugural broadcast. On opening night, the "Old South Negro Quartet" was a prominent musical feature, showcasing the black *a cappella* religious music that had deep roots in Virginia.⁵⁰ Both the Edgeworth Negro Chorus and the Old South Negro Quartet sang church songs that WRVA promotional materials referred to euphemistically as "Negro spirituals."

⁴⁸ None of the station's records indicate explicitly that the black performers were Larus plant workers. There are indications, however, that at the very least the station *advertised* the singers as plant workers. In 1933, the *Washington Post* described the "Tobacco Boys" as men who "all work in the tobacco factories of Richmond and frequently rehearse their songs while working." Robert D. Heinl, "Radio Dial Flashes," *Washington Post*, Jan. 25, 1933, 13. The fact that the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* featured African American performers singing "authentic" Negro spirituals was a point of pride for station officials, and they emphasized it in both public and private correspondence. See, for example, the Richmond Chamber of Commerce memo, drafted from a WRVA press release, bragging that the Corn Cob Pipe Club "feature[d] the genuine Negro spirituals by representatives of their own race in contrast to the policy ten years ago of having spirituals sung by trained white singers." "WRVA: A Virginia Enterprise," Edmond Brill to Walter Bishop, ca. 1936-1939, VCU: Lucy Papers.

⁴⁹ Most of WRVA's promotional and – perhaps more critically – anniversary materials identify the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* as WRVA's first and most popular program. Much of the material cites the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* as the first WRVA program broadcast nationwide via NBC. In reality, however, the first WRVA show that NBC picked up for national transmission was a series of performances of the Edgeworth Negro Chorus. And when the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* went out on the network a few months later, the Edgeworth Negro Chorus was part of the performance. On a style note, when I am writing about the chorus, I use the term Edgeworth Negro Chorus. I use italics when I am specifically referring to the radio show that WRVA eventually broadcast over the network, *Edgeworth Negro Chorus*.

⁵⁰ At the end of the evening, the quartet joined forces with "Arion's Orchestra and the Richmonders" to play – what else? – "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" as a sign-off. "Radio Station Opens Here Officially," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Nov. 2, 1925, 1. "Broadcasting Station here Makes Official Bow Tonight," *Ibid*.

If WRVA was part of the effort to write southern white supremacy onto the page of history, the presence of black choruses and quartets could be used in support of that effort. The “Old South Negro Quartet” harkened to that imagined past with its very name, implying a musical link between the black performers of the present with enslaved black men of the past. To some listeners, the Edgeworth Negro Chorus might have also reinforced romantic Old South imagery because the singers were all tobacco plant workers. Since before the Civil War, tobacco plant managers attempting to regulate the pace of work “wisely left their cat-o’-nine-tails hanging on the wall” and instead encouraged their black tobacco laborers to sing.⁵¹ If seen as a “company chorus” whose sounds on the radio mimicked the sounds of the workers on the shop floor, the Edgeworth Negro Chorus was partially reaffirming the subordinate position of black men in the workforce.

Not all listeners, however, would have heard sounds of the Old South mystique, as station officials intended, when they tuned in to black performances. Radio audiences, then as now, had highly subjective interpretations of what they were hearing. WRVA presented the Edgeworth Negro Chorus as “authentic” black men singing the music of blackness, but it is unlikely that listeners heard the intended message.⁵² Indeed, the inclusion of black voices on the air disrupted any number of intended messages about authenticity and race, as the

⁵¹ Peter Rachleff, *Black Labor in Richmond, 1865-1890* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 7.

⁵² WRVA literature repeatedly referred to the African American performers as “genuine Negroes.” This chapter will explore that phenomenon in more detail with regards to the black performers’ role on the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*. “WRVA: A Virginia Enterprise,” Edmond Brill to Walter Bishop, ca. 1936-1939,” VCU: Lucy Papers.

history of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* will demonstrate. Once in the ether, the disembodied black voices occupied a prominent position in Virginia's newest cultural landscape, and listeners were just as likely to hear the sounds of modernity as sounds of the past.

According to historian Vaughan Webb, "most of the Commonwealth's African-American quartets sang only to church-oriented audiences and maintained repertoires entrenched in the hymns and spirituals of folk culture. Others, however, took to vaudeville and radio, adding a stock of blues, pop, and minstrel numbers of their gospel repertoires."⁵³ It is altogether likely that the Edgeworth Negro Chorus and the "Old South Negro Quartet" were part of the latter group, borrowing and adapting from secular and religious music just as southern musicians of all races had been doing for a generation.⁵⁴ WRVA cast them as traditional, but the performers had more in common with the "New Negro" of the 1920s than enslaved field workers of the antebellum period. At the very least, the different African American singing groups that performed on WRVA in the early years were complicating both white constructions of blackness, and white constructions of southern history. Even more importantly, they were asserting African American constructions of blackness, and African American constructions of southern history.

⁵³ Vaughan Webb, "Why Don't You Rock My Soul: The African-American Quartet Tradition in Hampton Roads," *Virginia Cavalcade* 51, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 100-111, quotation from 101.

⁵⁴ Karl Miller makes a persuasive case for early-twentieth-century southern music as true fusion art. The policies of "segregating sound" that he identifies from the 1880s to the 1920s were reactions *against* that fusion. But simply labeling music "black" or "white" or "urban" or "rural" would not have undone the alchemy occurring every day through the music. The segregation mostly occurred after the music had been played, making radio a particularly illusive technology for the racialization of sound. Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound*.

When the Dixie Spiritual Singers posed for a publicity photograph “sometime in the 1920s,” according to the caption, the seventeen of them sat on hay or tobacco bales in a semi-circle, holding tobacco leaves while they sang into a WRVA microphone placed carefully in the middle.⁵⁵ At first glance, the arrangement was perfectly in sync with classic tropes of southern pastoralism. The bales affectionately recalled farming or plantation life, and the tobacco leaves tied the men to their labor and to the land (the leaves also reminded listeners to go buy more Edgeworth pipe tobacco). Without instruments or studio chairs and music stands, the men’s relevance for the scene seemed to be the facts of their manhood and race. Come meet “the genuine Negro of Virginia,” WRVA seemed to be saying.

The ruse could not work completely, however, because the performers were not tobacco pickers, and because no matter how much WRVA programs like the *Four Deuces* blurred the passage of time, radio was an instrument of the present. When the Dixie Spiritual Singers posed for the photograph, many of them were wearing suits, rendering the tobacco leaves and hay bales somewhat absurd.⁵⁶ Moreover, the microphone in the middle gave the lie to the stagecraft. These were black men of the 1920s performing in front of a microphone that would send their voices out of the studio at either 1,000 or 5,000 watts. The men posed with dignity, singing renditions of hymns that may even have been partially informed by blues and jazz. Even more critically, they were entering homes,

⁵⁵ Photograph from WRVA collection at Library of Virginia. Published in “Recording & Radio: WRVA and the 1929 Okeh Sessions,” *Virginia Cavalcade* 51, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 136-144, photograph on 142.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

restaurants, bars, and bedrooms with their music. Jim Crow had made an infinite number of spaces off-limits to African Americans, and especially to African American men. But segregation laws and customs, focused on policing people's bodies and physical spaces, could not regulate sound in the same way. There was no easily identifiable "space" of radio, given that it was simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, and the voices on it were disembodied. The new technology made it possible for groups like the Dixie Spiritual Singers to sing to black folks and white folks in their own homes. Although almost every aspect of their lives was contained and influenced by Jim Crow, the black musicians' voices did not even acknowledge its existence. The transcendence of these black sounds over the bureaucratization and policing of racial discrimination was not a return to a pastoral past, but a leap into the uncontrolled cultural chaos of modern life that radio technologies had created.

WRVA's first few years on the air were full of trial and error, experimentation, and improvisation, but a pattern began to emerge for the tone that the "Voice of Virginia" would adopt. The radio station raced for the "firsts": it was the first Virginia radio station to broadcast an American president "live," the first radio station in the country to broadcast an entire opera "live," the first station in the country to use a self-supporting wooden tower for a transmitting antenna.⁵⁷ Station officials proudly joined national radio associations and, as we shall see shortly, aggressively pursued inclusion in national networks. But alongside the

⁵⁷ WRVA materials referred to these three "firsts," among others, more than once over the years. The station broadcast Calvin Coolidge in 1926, *Il Trovatore* in 1928, and built the wooden tower in 1935. "WRVA: The Edgeworth Radio Station, Richmond, Virginia," 1939 pamphlet, LVA: WRVA Radio.

station's pride in cutting-edge technology and its position in a communications revolution was a deep vein of nostalgia and traditionalism. The *Edgeworth Negro Chorus*, the *Farm Report*, Holland Wilkinson, and the *Four Deuces* presented different material, certainly, but each program drew upon perceptions of "the past" to attract listeners. From black men singing spirituals to hillbillies telling bad jokes, the sounds evoked bucolic simplicity, a docile and contented workforce, an unshakeable faith in God, and the dignity of work on the land. Arguably the most modern innovation of 1920s Richmond, WRVA had a distinctly "old-time" sound.

And yet, these first attempts at entertaining – at peopling the air – created a mix of peoples, ideas, and feelings that was not supposed to exist in 1920s Virginia. Against a backdrop of reactionary conservatism, rhetorical skepticism and hostility between city-dwellers and country-dwellers, and the iron grip of Jim Crow, WRVA became a space where interracial entertainment was normative, where local cultures blended publicly and smoothly, and where Richmonders sought inclusion in a transformative communications technology.

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In the mid- to late-1920s, WRVA was not the only radio station to adopt an "old-time" sensibility, though there were not many. A handful of stations in other cities, most notably WLS in Chicago and WSM in Nashville, knew that folks outside the city were tuning in who "were in no mood to accept cultural dictation from the cities," in the words of historian Clifford Doerksen.⁵⁸ WLS and WSM

⁵⁸ Clifford J. Doerksen, *American Babel: Rogue Radio Broadcasters of the Jazz Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 75.

began catering to rural tastes with programs that would eventually become *The National Barn Dance* and *The Grand Ole Opry*, respectively.⁵⁹ In his introduction to a collection of essays about the *National Barn Dance*, historian Chad Berry argues that “WLS [Chicago] consciously became the voice of rural America” during the mid-1920s.⁶⁰ WLS stood for **World’s Largest Store**, and was owned by Sears & Roebuck. WSM was shorthand for “**We Shield Millions**,” the official slogan of the National Life and Accident Insurance Company based in Nashville.⁶¹ Sears was hoping the radio station would help them sell farming equipment and consumer goods to farmers, and National Life and Accident was hoping the venture would result in “New Business, Opportunity, Service, Prestige, and PROFITS.”⁶² WLS and WSM went on to become two of the most

⁵⁹ Kristine McCusker and Chad Berry agree that WLS, Chicago, founded by Sears & Roebuck, was committed to attracting Midwestern farmers from its origins as a nonprofit agricultural station in the mid-1920s. Historian Clifford Doerksen argues, however, that the WLS management “initially regarded entertainment programs designed for farming families] as embarrassments to their public image. Only massive popular response prevented their replacement with more genteel alternatives.” Kristine M. McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels: The Women of Barn Dance Radio* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Chad Berry, ed, *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Clifford J. Doerksen, *American Babel*, 75.

⁶⁰ Chad Berry, ed, *The Hayloft Gang*, 5.

⁶¹ Craig Havighurst, *Air Castle of the South: WSM and the Making of Music City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), xvi.

⁶² Sears financed WLS’s beginnings because they wanted to have “a mass means of reaching a rural audience, an audience that relied on the Sears catalog to learn about and purchase products through mail order.” When the *Prairie Farmer* bought the radio station in 1928, the new owner continued using the station primarily as a means of reaching out to farmers in the hopes of winning loyal consumers for the advertisers of the magazine. Scott Childers, *Chicago’s WLS Radio* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 8. Whereas WLS used its programming to attract and generate goodwill among potential consumers of home goods and farming equipment, WSM began life with a more generalized consumer focus. WSM station manager Edwin Craig had to fight hard to convince the insurance company that a radio venture would be a useful one. It reportedly took him three years to convince the top brass, and even then they agreed because they figured that, at worst, it would do them no harm. Any benefit they could derive from the station they expected to be in dollars. At the outset, WSM’s officials were less interested in garnering goodwill than in spreading the word about National Life and Accident Insurance Company. Havighurst, *Air Castle of the South*, 12-13. Both stations were somewhat unusual, however, in their identification of “rural listeners” as an untapped source of potential consumers.

influential institutions in American cultural history, but neither began life as a noncommercial station committed to community uplift and boosterism. WRVA, which went on the air a little over a year after WLS and less than a month after WSM, had a slightly but significantly different approach.⁶³ Larus and Brother Company hoped WRVA would bring them “New Business” and “PROFITS,” too, but the station did not advertise itself that way. Instead, WRVA went on the air as the voice from “Down Where the South Begins,” dedicated to the service of Richmond, Virginia and to southern voices. If WLS was “the voice of rural America,” WRVA was trying to be the voice of the South – rural and urban.

The very idea of “old-time” radio was a cultural contradiction for many Americans. Radio was supposed to modernize and refine the tastes of backwater bumpkins; not bring the backwater into America’s cities. Trade magazine writers and northeastern broadcasters delighted in their conviction that rural listeners would somehow better themselves by listening to performances of classical music, opera, or even jazz. Up until the mid-1920s, one trade insider argued, “Americans, except those living in the larger cities, have been denied the privilege of hearing the best in music.”⁶⁴ Like manna from an electrified city on a hill, radio could bring sustenance to the culturally malnourished. Another journalist, while agreeing that rural American life was lacking something because of a dearth of “good music,” worried that rural Americans would not be interested in classical performances once radio provided access to them. Nevertheless,

Most stations of the time were directing their programming – and, ultimately, their advertising – at urban listeners.

⁶³ WLS began broadcasting on April 12, 1924, and WSM began broadcasting October 5, 1925.

⁶⁴ Charles Orchard, Jr., “Is Radio Making America Musical?” *Radio Broadcast* 5 (October 1924): 454-455.

“every broadcast director has the responsibility of using for a constructive purpose this greatest musical opportunity that has ever been made available to the public,” and “lower sorts” of music should thus not be permitted to dominate the radio.⁶⁵ In January 1925, J.C. Young put it more succinctly when he wrote “Radio – The Voice of the City...When WNYC sends out its evening call from the high Gothic tower of the Municipal Building on lower Manhattan Island, it speaks with the voice of the only American city which commands a place ‘on the air.’” Not only was New York the king of radio, in Young’s opinion, but competition would come only from other cities, “the personalities of [which] are to be made familiar throughout the ether.”⁶⁶ Radio was an innovation of cities, to be used for the benefit of cities. If farmers could elevate themselves by listening to its superior programming, so much the better. None of the trade journalists writing in the early to mid-1920s even considered the possibility that the farmers might have marketable sounds of their own.

It was not just a debate about radio, either. Americans in the 1920s were involved in a widespread discussion about the relative merits of urban innovation and rural tradition, and in much of the dominant literature the rural tradition was losing. The 1920 census showed that, for the first time in the history of the country, more people lived in cities, defined as communities of at least two thousands inhabitants, than in the relatively sparsely populated countryside. Even in Virginia, at least a third of the state’s residents now lived in cities.⁶⁷ New

⁶⁵ Jennie Irene Mix, “The Listeners’ Point of View,” *Radio Broadcast* 5 (June 1924): 120-126.

⁶⁶ J.C. Young, “Radio, the Voice of the City,” *Radio Broadcast* 6 (January 1925): 442-448, quot. from 442.

⁶⁷ Heinemann, et al, *Old Dominion, New Commonwealth*, 276.

York City most famously illustrated the electric potential of urban life in the Jazz Age, with its skyscrapers, ethnic enclaves, and infinite possibilities for commercial entertainment. But it was perhaps the shift in human behavior that was transforming the landscape the fastest. The “New Woman” and the “New Negro,” archetypes of the era, refused to settle for previous social and political arrangements, preferring instead to demand the full rights of citizenship, starting with education and suffrage. Young people of all races challenged the Victorian and Old-World values of their parents, forging a vibrant, sometimes irreverent, liberal American youth culture. Radio was a loudspeaker for these new city sounds, and many believed it would be a tool of assimilation for those who were not yet “with it.” When long-distance radio enthusiasts suggested that whole radio regions cease broadcasting every so often in 1923 so that listeners could tune in stations from farther afield, New York City stations refused. *Radio Broadcast* agreed, since the “‘best radio programs obtainable are sent out from New York,’ and it would be useless to deprive listeners of this entertainment.”⁶⁸ In the mid-1920s, radio was supposed to be a thoroughly urban product, and one that would enrich any and all who came into contact with it.

But the Jazz Age did not play as well outside the big cities of the Northeast and Midwest. White, southern men in particular were deeply uncomfortable with the transgressions of gender and race that urban entertainment seemed to encourage. Other southerners, black and white, worried that the urbanization and secularization of American culture would dissolve traditional bonds of

⁶⁸ “The Month in Radio,” *Radio Broadcast* 7 (September 1925): 601. Cited in Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio*, 17.

community and kinship without adequate replacement. Resistance to urban critiques and snubs of rural life surfaced in a number of ways, from Christian fundamentalism to the Ku Klux Klan.⁶⁹ In the world of radio, rural resistance to urban cultural imperialism took many forms, most often in the form of decentralized letter-writing campaigns, though sometimes just by a flick of the dial.⁷⁰

The National Farm Radio Council, an arm of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, conducted a nation-wide survey of farms with radios in 1926 in order “to find out just what the farmer wants to hear.” After a 1922 Department of Agriculture study found that “farmers are turning to radio more for instruction than for entertainment,” the Agricultural Education Service was formed to, in the words of President Calvin Coolidge, “result in the improvement of radio programs, a greater service to the farmer, and progress in the use of this wonderful and new invention.”⁷¹ When the surveyors interviewed farmers in 1926, they were expecting to hear that “the farmer is most interested in having himself uplifted and educated” by the city stations. What the survey found instead was that “lo and behold! it seems the tired farmer, just as the tired business man, is more eager to

⁶⁹ For an excellent synthesis of the challenges that many white southern men perceived to their authority in the 1920s, please see Chapter 2, “Where Money Rules and Morals Rot: The Vice of Modernity,” in MacLean, *The Mask of Chivalry*.

⁷⁰ Fan mail was a key reason that early experiments with hillbilly entertainment became permanent fixtures on the radio schedule. Historian Kristine McCusker researched and analyzed hundreds (if not thousands) of fan letters for the *National Barn Dance* that came to WLS in the 1930s. When favorite performer Linda Parker died at age 23 in 1935, the station was overwhelmed with condolence letters. The letter-writers were not seeking to shape programming decisions, but it is hard to imagine that WLS officials would have chosen to cancel or significantly alter the show after receiving proof of a large, adoring public. See McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels*, 29.

⁷¹ Federal Board for Vocational Education, *Sixth Annual Report to Congress of the Federal Board for Vocational Education* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), 121.

be entertained by his radio than taught.”⁷² The survey reported that farmers made good use of market and weather reports, and “news bulletins were in general demand.” But what they really liked were orchestras and bands, if they were playing the right kind of music. “There was a general objection to jazz and a general demand for more Hawaiian and old time music.”⁷³ A further study, commissioned by the Sears-Roebuck Agricultural Foundation, found that a plurality of the 18,000 farm homes surveyed preferred music on the radio to anything else. This was especially true of the “farm women in the tobacco lands, Kentucky and the Virginias,” who “will tune-in on anything, just so it is music, and they likewise are the most enthusiastic about church and religious programs.”⁷⁴ Although many advertisers were slow to recognize the potential, the non-urban audiences were substantial, and had a palate of discernible preferences that were sometimes at odds with the city fare.

The southern market was particularly ripe for enterprising radio upstarts. The geography of radio development meant that most transmission signals were not pointed southward, but were instead pointed toward northeastern or Midwestern urban markets. Even if broadcasters were trying to reach a southern

⁷² “What the Farmer Listens To,” *Radio Broadcast* 9 (August 1926): 316-317.

⁷³ “What the Farmer Listens To,” *Radio Broadcast* 9 (August 1926): 316-317. “Hawaiian music” referred to Hawaiian-inspired music that was played on steel instruments, or stringed instruments with steel bows. The “Hawaiian sound” became immensely popular in the early twentieth century and heavily influenced hillbilly music. For the “Hawaiian sound’s” effects on the development of country music, see Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 223. Tim Brookes suggests Hawaiian-style music proved popular on radio partly because of good timing, but mostly because it lent itself to a form of aural exoticism. “In the new theater of the imagination, as radio billed itself, Hawaiian music, like flamenco, came with its own live music video. Both forms were and to some extent still are intimately associated with dance. They made the guitar playing, already exotic and full of zest, into something undeniably sexy.” Tim Brookes, *Guitar: An American Life* (New York: Grove Press: 2005), 86-87.

⁷⁴ The survey was conducted specifically of farm-women. The survey was almost certainly commissioned to advise WLS programming decisions. “What the Farmer Listens To,” *Radio Broadcast* 9 (August 1926): 316-317.

audience, a much smaller proportion of southern households had radios compared with the rest of the country in the 1920s, largely because fewer households in the South had electricity and battery sets were expensive to operate.⁷⁵ WRVA officials recognized this, and created a southern sound that was allegedly created by and for southerners. They piped it up the East Coast too, though, just in case anyone else was listening in.

For the next several decades, WRVA would deploy a strategy of selling allegedly southern sounds both to southerners and non-southerners as a means of carving out its niche in the ever-expanding radio industry. The *Farm Market Report*, the *Four Deuces*, the *Sunshine Hour*, and the *Edgeworth Negro Chorus* all seemed to represent something distinctly southern. The *Farm Market Report* reaffirmed the perception of Virginia or “the South” as a rural land. And as the market research could attest, there were indeed many farmers in rural areas in the South and elsewhere who listened to the radio. But in combination with the *Edgeworth Negro Chorus* and the *Four Deuces*, the *Farm Market Report* also tied the station to the heavily romanticized, pastoral “Old South” that songs like “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” fictionalized. Holland Wilkinson’s folksy charm and plain-spoken religion were a huge hit with the WRVA listening audience, largely because he brought the kind pastor into the home. Even modern entertainment like radio had room for Christian and rural traditions.

⁷⁵ While 45.2% of Midwestern farm families had radio sets by 1930, only an estimated 10% of white southern farmers did. Timothy A. Patterson, “Hillbilly Music among the Flatlanders: Early Midwestern Radio Barn Dances,” *Journal of Country Music* 6 (1975): 12-18. As cited in Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 100. The number of urban, southern households with radios was undoubtedly higher, but still probably not as high as in Chicago or New York.

But perhaps most dramatically of all, the *Four Deuces* and the *Edgeworth Negro Chorus* brought the sounds of white and black rural rhythms, of the Old South and the New South, of whiteness and blackness, to radio. Like WSM, Nashville, and WGN, Chicago, WRVA invested heavily in an “old-time” feel that was informed largely by white southern nostalgia. But the lesson WRVA officials drew from the first two or three years of programming was not that tradition sells, but that the audience was thirsty for innovative ways of its (modern) performance. In the late 1920s and into the 1930s, WRVA’s most popular program was the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, a variety show featuring hillbillies, Tin Pan Alley tunes, blackface, and African American singers. Rather than use exactly the same tropes of race that early-twentieth-century minstrelsy had peddled, the new program opened the door for reinterpretation. And as WRVA’s audience expanded, and the show became even more popular, listeners themselves began using the program to explore alternative ideas about race, class, regionalism, and national identity.⁷⁶

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A slap-dash entertainment program originally called the *Edgeworth Frolic Night* would become one of WRVA’s most successful experiments in early programming. Conceived of and produced by studio director and announcer Elmer G. Hoelzle, the show was first broadcast on Friday, February 26, 1926.

⁷⁶ In his article “Blackface Broadcasting in the Early Days of Radio,” Noah Arceneaux poses a question for radio and/or blackface scholars. “Both [radio minstrelsy and hillbilly shows] invoked a similar image of a rural, rustic past. In the hillbilly shows, however, the distinction of race became instead a distinction of class, and a complete explanation of radio minstrelsy must take into account the centrality of class to its appeal...Can the two issues be cleanly separated?” Noah Arceneaux, “Blackface Broadcasting in the Early Days of Radio,” *Journal of Radio Studies* 12 (May 2005): 61-73, 70. I agree that this is the critical question to ask of the early radio minstrelsy, and the next section seeks to begin posing an answer to it.

Frolic Night featured a variety of informal performers: fiddlers, a Hawaiian guitar orchestra (that's what farmers wanted to hear, after all!), comedians, harmonic exponents, a washboard orchestra, a handsaw soloist, and the Edgeworth Negro Chorus.⁷⁷ The show received sufficient positive listener feedback – known officially as “applause” – to warrant a sequel a month later.⁷⁸ The second *Edgeworth Frolic Night* showcased different local talent, including a harmony team lead by Pat Binford, a musician with a gift for conversational improvisation who eventually became one of WRVA's most well-known voices.

Encouraged by the response to the second program, station personnel elected to broadcast *Frolic Night* at irregular intervals over the next year as they continued to experiment with their programming. On December 2, 1926, one week after the final *Edgeworth Frolic Night* aired, WRVA director and announcer Elmer G. Hoelzle reassembled the same performers with a familiar script and broadcast a new version of the *Frolic Night* he billed as *The Down Town Meeting of the Corn Cob Pipe Club*.⁷⁹ Hoelzle started the program as if starting a town meeting from a location about ten miles south of Richmond in a community called Dutch Gap. Elections were held for club officers, and popular performer Anthony Ende became the club's first president. The announcer spoke to the audience as if they were part of the town meeting as well, encouraging listeners to become

⁷⁷ “History of the Corn Cob Pipe Club,” LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁷⁸ Within hours of broadcasting for the first time, WRVA's studio director had put an “Applause Memo” system into practice. Unlike in other entertainment venues, radio broadcasters could not judge a program's success by audience reaction or (more importantly) box office receipts. WRVA had to rely on phone calls and fan mail to gauge listener response. In an effort to turn the sporadic responses into some form of useful data, clerks condensed the calls and letters into “Applause Memos,” detailing the name of the sender, city, state, and a brief summary of the comment. “Last Night and To-Day in Radio,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Nov. 4, 1925.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

intimately acquainted with the club's "members" (performers) and officers (program directors).⁸⁰ Despite the physical distance separating the audience from the act, performer and listener were joined together through a common interest in southern folk culture....and, WRVA's employees hoped, through their simultaneous, cheerful consumption of Edgeworth smoking tobacco. An immediate hit, the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* put WRVA on the map, as local listeners and amateur receivers all over the country tuned in. The show was a product of careful advertising and entertaining strategies on the part of the station's tobacco benefactor. And unlike the free-for-all rumpus of the *Frolic Night* or the *Four Deuces*, the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* offered something beyond old-time, casual, local entertainment: it offered authenticity and membership.

The *Corn Cob Pipe Club's* format was little more than a series of entertainers presenting themselves as down-home folk from the South. After the guest musicians played "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny," a white announcer hosted the evening, providing direction and commentary for the various performers he seemed to select at random from the "audience," as though he were at an informal gathering of musically gifted individuals. Some performers, like the Edgeworth Negro Chorus were well-known to the audience, while others were itinerant musicians who hailed from elsewhere in the region. When performers, who often had names like "Harmonica George" and "Hill Billy," came to the microphone to perform, both the announcer and the audience made a big show of clapping, stomping, and whistling along. To break up the music, the announcer would either "call up" a volunteer to do a sketch, or he would do one

⁸⁰ Ibid.

himself. Sketches included satirical literary recitations, blackface comedy routines from *Corn Cob Pipe Club* regulars “Saw Dust” and “Moonshine,” or simple banter between the announcer, the audience, and the musicians. After a dozen or more songs, the show ended with one more chuckle from the host and the sign-off, “From Dixie. Up and Out.”⁸¹

The *Corn Cob Pipe Club* was in some ways a departure from WRVA's earliest programming, but it was still in line with the white nostalgia that the *Four Deuces* and the *Edgeworth Negro Chorus* might provoke. Instead of orchestral pieces performed by classically-trained musicians, which were all the rage on northeastern radio stations, *Corn Cob Pipe Club* broadcasts featured local talent with decidedly non-cosmopolitan names to suit their non-cosmopolitan musical selections. The performers were both black and white, from Richmond and beyond, singing and playing on accordions, banjos, guitars, pianos, mouth harps, basses, clarinets, and cornets.⁸² A white group called the “Old-Time Fiddlers” brought in piles of fan mail in 1926 – possibly from the first *Frolic Night* broadcast – indicating that people as far away as Canada, Cuba, and New England enjoyed listening. Studio Director and *Corn Cob Pipe Club* organizer Elmer Hoelzle wrote to the group, praising them for “showing the country that we have lots of things in Richmond and Virginia to brag about.”⁸³

Radio station owners had discovered in the mid-1920s that old-time fiddling programs appealed to a wide variety of audiences, and several stations

⁸¹ Script, “Crossroads Hall,” May 27, 1938, LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁸² Bertha Hewlett, “Corn Cob Pipe Club – Playlist, ca. 1925-1935,” LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁸³ “Applause Memos, 1926,” LVA: WRVA Radio.

were experimenting with regular broadcasts of “old-timers” and their bands.⁸⁴

The “old-time” music’s popularity seemed to stem from the audience’s perception of it as “authentic” cultural expression. WRVA was selling a similar “authenticity” when it advertised the Edgeworth Negro Chorus as the “genuine Negro of Virginia.”⁸⁵ Both the old-time fiddlers and the black singers were supposed to represent an essential Americanness that had been untainted by the modern world. When the “Old-Time Fiddlers” first played for the *Frolic Night* in 1926, they were facilitating the cultural work of memory, allowing listeners to imagine or re-imagine a premodern past. But on the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, old-time music, traditional black spiritual singers, and hillbilly artists collided in a mélange of sound that could only have happened in, and represented, a modern South.

Hillbilly performers complicated the notion that the authentic must necessarily *not* be modern. Both the term and the image of the hillbilly were products of the mid-1920s, created primarily by the new radio medium. The hillbilly was a self-reliant, uneducated man, usually white, who felt at home in natural surroundings, and seemed to preserve an American ethos many Americans of the 1920s felt had vanished. Unlike the wizened men who performed old-time music, however, the hillbilly was in tune with the modern world, if he was not entirely comfortable in it. Audiences enjoyed both laughing at and feeling affection for the hillbilly, whose “humor, aggression, and love

⁸⁴ The show that ultimately developed into the popular *Grand Ole Opry* originated as a Saturday-evening country program featuring a solitary old white man playing a fiddle. Interestingly, the seventy-seven-year-old fiddler, a performer who went by “Uncle Jimmy Thompson,” debuted on WSM from Nashville the same month that the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* debuted on WRVA. He claimed to have learned music during the Civil War, and fit well into the “climate of the mid-1920s quest for authenticity in old-time music and quixotic characters.” Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 69-70.

⁸⁵ “History of Corn Cob Pipe Club,” LVA: WRVA Radio.

laments” were “set off against and often triggered by the intrusion of urban ways.”⁸⁶ The hillbilly was both a relic of an American past and a connection to the unfolding present; he was simultaneously a guardian of essential American values and a clueless yokel.

In the charitable iterations, such as the 1941 film *Sergeant York*, the hillbilly might represent the pioneer spirit of the Anglo-Saxon man.⁸⁷ Less charitable depictions of hillbillies, such as the infamous Scraggs family from the *L’il Abner* comic strip, made the hillbilly seem lazy, dumb, and possibly criminal.⁸⁸ Whether positive or negative, however, most iterations of the hillbilly offered an alternative – however comedic – to the dizzying pace of modern life and industry. For better or worse, the hillbilly travelled the path not taken, and was therefore a perfect vehicle for exploring the consequences of modernity. Historian Anthony Harkins argues persuasively that “the hillbilly has...served at times of national soul-searching and throughout the twentieth century as a continually negotiated mythic space through which modern Americans have attempted to define themselves and their national identity and to reconcile the past and the present.”⁸⁹

According to literature published by the station several decades later on the occasion of WRVA’s anniversary, the African American men who sang in a choir, referred to as both the Edgeworth Negro Chorus and the Dixie Spiritual

⁸⁶ Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 70-80, quote on 70.

⁸⁷ Anthony Harkins has argued he was also a racial “other” in the sense that he was more of an ancestor than a modern-day relative, placing him at the center of debate about American racial identity and hierarchy. Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁸⁸ The Scraggs were perhaps the most evil and pathological hillbillies ever depicted in popular culture.

⁸⁹ Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 4.

Singers, were the show's most popular performers.⁹⁰ A history of the broadcast written several years later bragged that "WRVA pioneered" the practice of "present[ing]...the genuine Negro of Virginia," instead of permitting white singers to impersonate black voices.⁹¹ The strategy to air "genuine" blackness – and to advertise it – suggests two important things about station officials' vision of both radio and their position "down where the South begins." First, if radio was a modern panoply of sound, WRVA officials were making a conscious effort to racialize it. Second, officials sold blackness as though it were a southern commodity like tobacco or corn. Blackness, whether performed through blackface or by "the genuine Negro of Virginia," was a distinct, regional product that WRVA officials showcased. If the *Sunshine Hour* and the *Farm Market Report* celebrated religious and farming traditions in the Old Dominion, the Edgeworth Negro Chorus and the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* celebrated its racial traditions.

The format itself was not necessarily innovative. Minstrel shows had long ago employed a host, or interlocutor, to direct the troupe and be a common reference point for the audience. Standing on a stage surrounded by his performers, the interlocutor was supposed to be "genteel in comportment" and

⁹⁰ Three black male singing groups made regular appearances on the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*: the Edgeworth Negro Chorus, the Dixie Spiritual Singers, and the Tobacco Boys. I am fairly certain that the Edgeworth Negro Chorus and the Tobacco Boys were two names for the same group. The Dixie Spiritual Singers may have been a smaller group more focused on the popular quartet style of singing. I will differentiate between the groups where possible, but for the sake of simplicity I refer to the performers generally as the Edgeworth Negro Chorus. Walter R. Bishop, *WRVA Radio, 35 Years* (Richmond, Va.: [WRVA Radio?], 1960), 3. See also Robert D. Heintz, "Radio Dial Flashes," *Washington Post*, Jan. 25, 1933, 13; Doug Douglas, "Radio Program Appeals to All," *Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 1932, 16.

⁹¹ CD-1: "Corn Cob Pipe Club Sound Recording 1933," LVA: WRVA Radio. "History of Corn Cob Pipe Club," LVA: WRVA Radio.

not only keep the show moving, but also lend it a modicum of dignity.⁹² For the first part of the show, “endmen” from either end of a semi-circle of performers would rib the interlocutor good-naturedly, and banter between the host and the endmen became as much a part of the spectacle as the music. In the second part of the program, members of the troupe gave individual comedic sketches before the program concluded with “an afterpiece of burlesque: a piece of sketch comedy – sometimes a travesty of a popular piece of literature or drama, sometimes set on the old plantation – that always relied on familiar blackface dialect humor.”⁹³ The *Corn Cob Pipe Club* replicated this pattern, occasionally employing endmen “Saw Dust” and “Moonshine” to joke with Pat Binford, having performers offer comedic sketches, and ending with literary parodies.⁹⁴

But radio, with its heavy reliance on sound and its unseen audience, was not a vaudeville stage. Robert Allen has argued that “in both burlesque and minstrelsy, the form’s transgressive and inversive qualities were borne by the bodies of its performers.”⁹⁵ The body of the blackface minstrel was “unequivocally grotesque,” seeming to “outgrow its own limits” and signifying that the body was “in the act of becoming,” in the words of Mikhail Bakhtin.⁹⁶ Traditional endmen’s make-up highlighted the mouth in particular, giving the impression that the character was a big gaping hole. Although humor and music

⁹² Historians disagree about whether the interlocutor was more often in whiteface or blackface. See Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque in American Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 164. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 140.

⁹³ Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 165.

⁹⁴ Station manager Calvin Lucy’s rendition of “The Crow,” which he performed in blackface as “Jes’ Plain Sam” on a 1933 broadcast, was one such example of what Allen calls an “afterpiece” or “burlesque.” CD-1: “Corn Cob Pipe Club Sound Recording 1933,” LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁹⁵ Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 174.

⁹⁶ Bakhtin as cited in Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 174.

were critical ingredients of a minstrel or vaudeville show, so were the costumes and physical mannerisms of the performers. The body was the key site of racial construction and parody, but the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* was not presenting bodies to its listening audience. Instead, the program presented sounds of whiteness and sounds of blackness, and distinctions between the two were often not readily apparent. The caricatures of black folks were considerably less important in the *Corn Cob Pipe Club's* format than a more generalized – and biracial – sound of “the plantation” or the “Old South.”

In *Beyond Blackface*, Stephanie Dunson argues that “in performance and in print, the first era of the blackface tradition [in the 1840s] constituted a cumulative denial of the corporeal fact of black identity.”⁹⁷ The cumulative denial of black personhood persisted in the early-twentieth-century blackface tradition, despite the rise in popularity of black minstrel troupes in the late nineteenth century.⁹⁸ The *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, despite its use of two blackface performers, largely broke the pattern of cumulative denial that Dunson outlines. For one thing, nothing was “corporeal” on radio. But the critical difference between the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* and blackface minstrelsy – including most early radio minstrelsy – was the interracial nature of the broadcast. On the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, the displacement did not occur when one person inhabited the body of another, but when an entire group of people – both black and white – were

⁹⁷ Stephanie Dunson, “Black Misrepresentation in Nineteenth-Century Sheet Music Illustration,” in W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed. *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 54.

⁹⁸ For discussion of black minstrel troupes like the Georgia Minstrels, for example, please see Eileen Southern, “The Georgia Minstrels: The Early Years,” in Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, Brooks McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Minstrelsy* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 163-178.

temporally relocated to the “Old South.” Abstract concepts of tradition and history, articulated through a large cast of black and white men, gave the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* its aura of authenticity. The interracial quality of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* was arguably what the audience found most “authentic” – and appealing – about the show.⁹⁹

As many historians and musicians have argued, distinctions between “black” and “white” southern music in the early twentieth century were not only problematic, they were altogether false. Musicians borrowed and shared among themselves freely and respectfully; the sounds they produced were the offspring of intimacy and intermingling. Laws and customs of Jim Crow could not police southern music, and *sounds* were utterly uncontained by racial and sexual mores. Historian Karl Miller has demonstrated how a legion of artists and scholars “came to compartmentalize southern music according to race” in the first decades of the twentieth century only through concerted efforts. African American musicians played the blues; white musicians played country music; and all other music was ignored. In the 1880s and 1890s, Miller argues, “black and white performers regularly *employed* racialized sounds. By the [1920s], most listeners expected artists to *embody* them.”¹⁰⁰ Segregated spaces such as music halls and churches, racialized record labels (“race” or “hillbilly” music, for

⁹⁹ In newspaper radio columns, radio critics almost always singled out the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*'s “Negro harmonists” or “real colored harmony and fun” as primary reasons to tune in. “These southern colored boys and girls broadcasting from Richmond, Va., do put a real moon of music in the southern sky,” wrote LA radio reporter Doug Douglas. Doug Douglas, “Russian Author on Air Today,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 17, 1932, 16.

¹⁰⁰ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 2, 4.

example), and several decades of academic insistence all contributed to the segregation of sound by the time WRVA went on the air in 1925.¹⁰¹

But sound, in its purest form, cannot be segregated. Many of the mechanisms that contributed to the segregation of sound in the early twentieth century were irrelevant for radio. Radio listening often happened in segregated spaces – homes and stores, for example – but the radio airwaves were not themselves segregated. WRVA's listeners were sometimes presented with "black" and "white" music, but one program flowed into another without clear differentiation between "race" and "hillbilly" music. Unlike with a phonograph, listeners did not choose a "race" or "hillbilly" record to play; rather, their evening's entertainment on the radio included both the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* and the *Edgeworth Negro Chorus*, sometimes on the same program. And perhaps most critically, radio voices were *disembodied*. If, as Karl Miller argues, most Americans believed that southern music sprang from the essential blackness or whiteness of the performer's body, radio erased the "proof." Instead, listeners were left to construct race or racial meaning from the sounds that they heard, giving individuals the widest possible latitude for identifying and defining concepts of blackness or whiteness that were not tethered to someone's body.

¹⁰¹ Okeh Records was an early innovator in the compartmentalization and marketing of sound by ethnicity or race. The company, founded in 1916, produced records for small target audiences, including immigrant communities, African Americans, and country music-loving whites. Okeh officials quickly found that Americans outside those communities had a broad appetite for new sounds, and Okeh simplified its labeling to appeal to mainstream consumers. Okeh and other record companies began employing the term "race record" to describe recordings of black singers, partly because it advertised desired "otherness" to white consumers. Additionally, the black press used the term "race" as "symbolic of black pride and solidarity," a fact that Okeh and other labels noticed and "employed the term in their marketing strategies." William Barlow, *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 18. Interestingly, Okeh did a recording of WRVA's performers in 1929. "Recording & Radio: WRVA and the 1929 Okeh Sessions," *Virginia Cavalcade* 51, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 136-141.

In the late 1930s, a Richmond Chamber of Commerce memo bragged that the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* “feature[ed] the genuine Negro spirituals by representatives of their own race in contrast to the policy ten years ago of having spirituals sung by trained white singers.”¹⁰² Obviously, proclaiming the Edgeworth singers as “authentic Negroes” highly racialized their art; the singers were black, so their music represented sounds of blackness. But in the context of the broader tradition of blackface, WRVA’s insistence on distinguishing the “black” music as coming from authentically black artists was somewhat surprising. Since the mid-nineteenth century, white minstrels had insisted – sometimes explicitly – that “genuine black music emerged from white bodies.”¹⁰³ The entire blackface genre depended upon a white audience’s willingness to accept the deception. Much of this had changed by the 1920s, when a generation of scholars had successfully sold the idea that anything authentic must exist outside of the marketplace,¹⁰⁴ but questions remained about who could own which expressions and which sounds. By mixing hillbilly performances of whiteness, white performances of blackface, and black performances of “genuine Negro spirituals” on the same microphone in the same program, WRVA was painting a portrait of a blended southern experience that

¹⁰² “WRVA: A Virginia Enterprise,” Edmond Brill to Walter Bishop, ca. 1936-1939, VCU: Lucy Papers. The memo was probably drafted in consultation with WRVA officials, and then sent out all over the state under the auspices of the Richmond Chamber of Commerce.

¹⁰³ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 5. Many other historians have shaped my thinking on this, including Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), and Robert C. Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).

¹⁰⁴ For broader discussions of the location of authenticity outside the marketplace, please see Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997) and Jane S. Becker, *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

defied either historic or contemporary attempts to segregate it. As Karl Miller warns, “an interracial musical culture had nothing to do with interracial harmony or equality.”¹⁰⁵ But an interracial musical culture, shared by disembodied voices across unsegregated airwaves, posed a significant challenge to forces of white supremacy and racial inequality.

There were few, if any, other shows on the airwaves in the late 1920s and early 1930s with interracial casts, even one as disjointed as that of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*. Despite *Amos ‘n’ Andy*’s popularization of blackness on the air, very few radio voices were actually black.¹⁰⁶ Even though much of the music and comedy presented on radio originated with black performers, white musicians got the gigs, much to the consternation of black performers.¹⁰⁷ Network radio in particular was devoid of black performers until the mid to late 1930s, with the exception of some all-black jazz orchestras.¹⁰⁸ But even in the case of jazz – the most edgy musical art form of the 1920s – radio shied away from luminaries like

¹⁰⁵ Miller, *Segregated Sounds*, 12.

¹⁰⁶ *Amos ‘n’ Andy* did not regularly use black actors until the show moved from California to Chicago in 1937-1938. At about the same time, the show’s creators began airing a minstrel version of the show once a week that included both white and black characters, though black characters were still performed in blackface. See Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos ‘n’ Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 196-197.

¹⁰⁷ Much if not most of the popular music of the mid- to late 1920s was rooted in black music, but Tin Pan Alley nearly always recorded white musicians “covering” black music, rather than the black musicians themselves. “Race Records,” though popular in niche markets, were not played by radio stations, not a single one of which was owned by an African American until the late 1940s. A handful of white musicians made careers out of impersonating black singers, including Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor, but black musical prodigies of the 1920s like Louis Armstrong or Bessie Smith were rarely heard on radio. William Barlow, *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio*, 21-22. Historian Mel Ely explores African American frustration with this racial “covering” at great length in Chapter 9, “The Black Debate Begins,” in *The Adventures of Amos ‘n’ Andy*.

¹⁰⁸ Perhaps the most famous black radio actor of the 1930s was Eddie Anderson, who played Jack Benny’s valet “Rochester van Jones” on *The Jack Benny Program*. Anderson’s first appearance was in 1937. Benny Goodman introduced network radio to the first interracial musical group in 1935 when he invited black pianist Teddy Wilson to join his jazz trio. As far as I can tell, there was not a single interracial cast on network radio from 1932-1934, when the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* went national on NBC.

Louis Armstrong, Chick Webb, and Duke Ellington, who were all well-known and well-respected by the late 1920s. In the words of radio historian John Dunning, “the tide of American taste, thus the lion’s share of radio air time, went to more traditional people.”¹⁰⁹ In this case, “traditional” was synonymous with “white.”

Listener response to the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, particularly after it began broadcasting nationwide in 1932, suggests the opposite. Mainstream American taste was piqued by the “real Virginia country folks” on the show,¹¹⁰ and radio columnists were particularly delighted when “the Corn Cob Pipe Club Negro harmonists loll on cabin porches and fill the night with music.”¹¹¹ Radio broadcasters, who were all white in the 1920s and 1930s, had collectively if non-explicitly decided that a majority of listeners would not desire or tolerate black voices on the air. But when NBC linked the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* to national feeds, listeners from all over the country – most of whom were white – responded emphatically and enthusiastically. Rather than being offended or uncomfortable with the interracial cast, they began joining the “club.” By the thousands. When black performers walked up to the microphones in WRVA’s studios, they were crossing a color line that extended far beyond Jim Crow Virginia.

★

The *Corn Cob Pipe Club* was countercultural, in a way, articulating a cultural narrative that was at odds with much of the sounds and sights of the New Era’s biggest urban centers. Corn cob pipes, not cigarettes. Overalls, not wool

¹⁰⁹ John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 62.

¹¹⁰ Robert D. Heini, “Radio Dial Flashes,” *Washington Post*, June 14, 1933, 8.

¹¹¹ Doug Douglas, “Bishop Stevens to Go on Air,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 7, 1932, 14.

trousers. Hawaiian guitars, not saxophones. Black men working the land, not black men in suits striding down city streets. Virginia, not New York City. Many of the show's fans demonstrated great affection for this aural alternative to modern city life, especially those fans from the Northeast. Listeners closer to the source were thrilled to have Virginia voices beaming so far afield, and expressed satisfaction at finding a representation of themselves, or the culture they imagined they lived in, on America's first mass medium.

WRVA officials had made the celebration of Virginia a key part of their civic mission, and the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* helped fulfill it. "Harmonica George," "Hill Billy," and the Edgeworth Negro Chorus were all singing with regional and racialized voices, which WRVA officials saw as being in direct conversation with northeastern radio. "A definite policy has been mapped out from the very start with W.R.V.A., which was to use our own local talent and talent throughout the state of Virginia," a one-year anniversary broadcast stated in 1926. "A great many people often say that New York talent is superior to other program talent. That may be the case but where does New York talent come from? Not from New York City itself, but from practically every other city in the United States."¹¹² When the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* signed off "from Dixie," they were not just addressing local listeners, but the entire nation. This desire to be part of a national conversation drove WRVA officials to aggressively seek inclusion in network broadcasting in the late 1920s, even as they worked hard to maintain regional distinctiveness.

¹¹² Transcript of one-year anniversary introduction. Aired at 8PM on Nov. 2, 1926, VCU: Lucy Papers.

On January 1, 1929, WRVA officially joined the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) radio network. That same week, with the help of network programs to round out the schedule and revenue brought in from the sale of advertising time, WRVA began broadcasting twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week as a commercial radio station.¹¹³ The introduction of a 5,000-watt transmitter nine months later in August of 1929 also meant that WRVA began reaching a much wider audience than before. Even as WRVA began importing radio programs from areas outside Virginia, then, it also began “exporting” in-house programming in larger quantities across a wider geographical plane due to the boost in broadcasting time and power. Virginians with radio sets could listen to both national voices and local voices any time of the day or night; indeed, it must have been hard at times to distinguish between them.

Unsurprisingly, out-of-state interest in WRVA expanded after 1929. Not only had WRVA joined the NBC network team and boosted its signal strength, but the newly formed Federal Radio Commission (FRC) had cleared the way for WRVA’s exclusive use of its frequency in late November of 1928. Until that time, anyone with a transmitter could broadcast over any available airwave, meaning that signals were crashing into each other from various points and causing large amounts of static that sometimes obscured licensed radio stations, despite their signal strength. The unregulated traffic on the airwaves had prompted the federal government to pass the Radio Act of 1927, which created the FRC and gave it the power to license stations and assign dial frequencies in the hopes that such a

¹¹³ Up to that point, it had only been broadcasting five days a week for eighteen hours at a time due to limited material and resources.

move would dramatically improve reception. The result cut out large areas of static and interference in the Northeast, and suddenly listeners in New York and Washington, D.C. could consistently pick up station WRVA.¹¹⁴

The Washington Post heralded the station as a “national clear channel” that “sounds as if it were a local station.”¹¹⁵ While the *Post* had been publishing WRVA's program line-up in the daily radio program guide since January 3, 1927, the radio editor also began frequently discussing WRVA's programs in his daily column after 1929.¹¹⁶ WRVA's in-house programs were attracting and affecting a much larger audience than station officials had originally anticipated. By April 1930, the sky was the limit, and WRVA requested a license for a 50,000-watt transmitter from the Federal Radio Commission less than a year after asking for and receiving one of 5,000 watts.¹¹⁷ At the time, only a handful of stations in the country could boast transmitting strength of 50,000 watts. Though WRVA did not receive a license for a 50,000-watt transmitter until 1939, the 1930 request indicated that station management felt WRVA could compete with the largest stations in the country.

Within five years of broadcasting, WRVA employees and audiences both within and without Virginia's borders had propelled the “Voice of Virginia” into the national conversation generated by radio technology. The station that billed itself

¹¹⁴ *Annual Report of the Federal Radio Commission to the Congress of the United States for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1929*, “List of Licensed Broadcasting Stations in Effect July 1, 1929,” 55-60.

¹¹⁵ “Richmond is Easily Heard in Capital,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 3, 1929, 10.

¹¹⁶ In particular, Robert S. Heintz, the radio editor, was a big fan of the Corn Cob Pipe Club and wrote about it extensively on half a dozen occasions.

¹¹⁷ Robert S. Heintz, “Dial Flashes,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 6, 1930, 9; *Annual Report of the Federal Radio Commission to the Congress of the United States for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1929*, “Report of the Federal Radio Commission, Outstanding Broadcast Station Authorizations, November 9, 1929,” 101.

as the point “down where the South begins” simultaneously transmitted regional and northeastern programming, for an audience that was primarily regional and northeastern – though sometimes national and international – in composition. When NBC added the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* as a weekly feature on Wednesday nights in 1932, listeners from all over the country responded so quickly and positively, and in such large numbers, that officials quickly decided to expand WRVA’s reach by offering something more than entertainment. They began offering formal membership into this club of mixed southern sounds.

Once WRVA officials realized the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*’s new potential as a network program, they took steps to secure their position on the national lineup. The genius of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* in the network era was its emphasis on membership, inclusion, and subscription. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the program directors began referring to the *listeners* as the true members of the “club,” instead of the performers. To reinforce that line, WRVA began offering actual membership benefits to fans who wrote their names and addresses on the back of Edgeworth smoking tin labels and mailed them to the station. Upon receiving the labels, WRVA secretary Bertha Hewlett put together a package including a corn cob pipe, a formal “Membership Certificate,” printed in color with a raised seal and Hewlett’s signature, and a letter of welcome.¹¹⁸ To formalize the theme of membership, the announcer followed up the first musical act of the broadcast with a solemn swearing-in of sorts. He divulged the number of membership applications since the last program and then asked the audience whether they would receive the applicants or not. The answer was a boisterous

¹¹⁸ “Corn Cob Pipe Club – Membership Certificate,” LVA: WRVA Radio.

“aye!”, and any aspiring member listening to the radio at home must have felt part of a larger community that was as eager to include as it was to entertain.¹¹⁹

WRVA’s new emphasis on group membership rather than individual membership must have changed the way some people listened. The program’s announcer routinely encouraged eager listeners to identify other listeners in the community and gather to listen to broadcasts together. Listeners seemed responsive to the entreaties, and requests for materials to start local *Corn Cob Pipe Club* “clubs” poured in.¹²⁰ Benedict Anderson has suggested that abstract concepts of nationhood are predicated on “imagined communities,” in which people create social constructions of community through imagined connections to and commonalities with one another.¹²¹ The *Corn Cob Pipe Club* did not set out to create a nation, but listeners used the option of membership both to articulate an imagined community for lovers of sounds of the “Old South,” and also to translate that affection into real communities.

To make membership tangible, WRVA circulated a bimonthly magazine called *Smoke to Corn Cob Pipe Club* members starting in 1934, free of charge. The magazine matched faces with familiar voices, and included performer biographies as well as profiles of individual clubs. Each month, the featured

¹¹⁹ CD-1: “Corn Cob Pipe Club Sound Recording 1933,” LVA: WRVA Radio.

¹²⁰ In an official publication of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, an un-named WRVA manager wrote, “You will note that we have combined the May and June issues of ‘Smoke.’ This became necessary on account of the tremendous amount of work, piled on each and every member of the publication staff, in connection with our International Membership Campaign. Mail has poured in on us. Applications for C.C.P.C. memberships by the thousands, and letters about this, that, and the other, each item requiring individual handling...we have practically been in the ‘pipe-shipping’ business for the past few weeks...It is indeed gratifying to know that we have so many friends and patrons throughout the land, and when we think about the thousands and thousands of pipes that will be ‘packed’ with Edgeworth we are happy to be the makers of this famous blend...” *Smoke* magazine, May-June 1935, VCU: Lucy Papers.

¹²¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).

club's profile revealed the mechanisms of club organization and the function of meetings. Speaking for club no. 778 from Atlantic City, N.J. Mace Cooper wrote:

Gentlemen – I have been an Edgeworth tobacco smoker for the last eight or nine years, and when I purchased the billiard parlor at 9 ½ S. South Carolina Avenue, in Atlantic City, I naturally stocked Edgeworth. The boys gathered around me began to sniff pleasantly at the smoke clouds emitting from your truly [sic]. When they asked me where I got the good tobacco and what do you call it, I just pointed to the familiar blue tins. 'Nuff sed.

Today the club boasts of a membership of twenty-five enthusiastic pipe smokers, more than half of whom smoked nothing but cigarettes heretofore. Listening to your broadcast one night we decided there and then to organize a local branch of the Corn Cob Club.

The members get a great kick out of the display of membership certificates plastered on the wall, not forgetting the log rack holding the good old corn cobs.

Our meetings are informal – oh, very informal. Our main business consisted of arguing and discussing any subject that leaves itself open to attack. A cook keg of ye olde brew keeps things moving smoothly no little [sic]...¹²²

The men of club no. 778, whom Cooper describes as “business men and executives,” used the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* as a reason to congregate in the fraternal environment of the neighborhood saloon. With their certificates on the wall and their corn cob pipes in the rack, these men had reserved seats not only in radioland, but in a billiard parlor in Atlantic City as well. One of the primary reasons these men met seems to have been simply to share a relaxed moment in a secluded male preserve that was free of bosses, families, and “outsiders” who were not part of the club. The formation of a club to enjoy the “benefits” of pipe-smoking was a tribute to many people’s desire to escape their contemporary

¹²² *Smoke* magazine, May-June 1935, VCU: Lucy Papers.

world in favor of a world perceived to be older, purer, and somehow more enjoyable.

There are no definitive listenership statistics from the first years of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club's* network broadcasts, but anecdotal evidence and an analysis of club membership by state gives a good indication. All official documentation of the clubs indicates their members were white and were men. Club officials frequently mailed photographs of new clubs to the station, many of which made their way into the permanent files. Whether African American listeners chose to send photographs that were not archived, did not choose to send photographs at all, or did not create clubs is unclear. What is clear is that, by the spring of 1935, the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* had attracted a growing membership that was national in scope. Thirty-eight states, the District of Columbia, and an undisclosed number of foreign countries laid claim to at least one club; twenty-five cities could claim at least four. In all, 778 groups of listeners had requested and received membership by mid-1935. Significantly, the vast majority of the clubs were in industrial centers of the Northeast and northern mid-west. New York (112 clubs), Pennsylvania (80), Massachusetts (56), and Ohio (56) led the way, with southern states like Louisiana (1), Arkansas (1), Alabama (3), and even Virginia (7), bringing up the rear.¹²³ Of the twenty-five cities that could claim at least four clubs, only Washington, D.C. could be considered geographically southern. The lopsided geographical distribution of the clubs can partially be explained by the direction of WRVA's antenna (which aimed transmission to the north and west). But given the fact that WRVA's

¹²³ *Smoke Magazine*, May-June 1935, VCU: Lucy Papers.

largest listenership was in Virginia, this hardly explains why there were so few clubs in the Commonwealth.

The disproportionate northeastern membership is perhaps not surprising considering that major urban centers were ripe for clubs of this nature. For one thing, the large numbers of people living in a small area made identification of other listeners more likely and the logistics of meeting more practical. One could also argue that industrialism and urbanization had affected the people living in those big, new cities to a much greater extent than people living in the rest of the country, giving them the incentive to seek out correctives and companionship. But there was more to the urban interest in the program than might be readily apparent. When northern listeners gathered together around radios in homes or businesses, they were involved in an act of cultural sharing with white southerners. Their purpose was not to ridicule the antics of “backwoods” whites or African Americans, but to embrace a culture through the practice of leisurely smoking pipes while listening to acts of blackface, hillbilly music, and black spiritual singers. The *Corn Cob Pipe Club of Virginia* made a point of pretending to exist in a time far removed from the anxieties and uncertainties of the present. WRVA staff achieved this effect by repackaging the modern South's mythologizing of an antebellum white utopia, and listeners outside of the South were buying it.

It is also not entirely surprising that listeners in southern states did not go to the trouble of forming listening clubs and applying for membership. Why join a club you were already a part of? The *Corn Cob Pipe Club* was selling sounds of

nostalgia to southern listeners just as much as it was selling it to non-southern listeners, but the difference was that the particular brand of nostalgia offered up by the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* was nothing new to Virginians of all races. When Robert Heintz of the *Washington Post* described the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* as featuring “music redolent of the South and of the plantations of Virginia,” he invoked the same imagery that many Virginia writers, state politicians, and college football teams regularly deployed.¹²⁴ For southern listeners, the thrill was likely not in joining the club, but in hearing it broadcast on the nation’s first mass medium. When the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* went out on the network, Virginia’s hillbillies and spiritual singers became part of the national voice. And the “club” seemed to be recruiting new members. It was, in one sense, a process of validation.

No listener mail survives to indicate the size or reaction of black listeners, but it is altogether likely that the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* had a large African American listenership, especially locally. There were precious few black voices on the air, after all; to my knowledge, the singers of the Edgeworth Negro Chorus were the only black Virginians on the air in the late 1920s and early 1930s. If black Richmonders were avid listeners of *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, as Mel Ely suggests, it seems logical to assume that many of them would have put up with “Saw Dust”

¹²⁴ Robert D. Heintz, “Dial Flashes,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 3, 1932, 8. Ed Ayers, drawing on a wealth of unpublished papers and master’s theses, explores the pageantry of college football in Virginia and elsewhere in the South as a major site for the reinvention of white southern/Confederate identity in the early twentieth century. See Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction*, 15th anniv. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 313-315.

and “Moonshine” to listen to the black spiritual singers – who were real African Americans – on the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*’s broadcasts.

Southern nostalgia, moreover, was not limited to whites. Old-time religion and songs about moonlit nights in the countryside were attractive to black southern listeners for many of the same reasons that the programs were attractive to whites: childhood memories, strong Christian faith, and for the black southerners who were migrating to Chicago and New York in droves there was an acute sense of longing for home. In the mid-1930s, African American performer Clarence Muse made a splash in the Midwest when he used non-instrumental sound to create “settings” for his music on the air in Chicago. “Songs are the blossoms of ideas,” wrote *The Capital Plaindealer* of Topeka, Kansas. “Follow that song to its birthplace, reveal its original environment and setting and the reason for its being, and you have a jewel – a symphonic picture.” Muse spun his scene in a “recitative manner,” describing crickets chirping, owls hooting, and “colored folk...coming through the cotton fields and off the nearby tobacco plantations, down the river bypaths to the common meeting place.”¹²⁵ His invocation of rural sounds and black folk working the land was not dissimilar from the *Four Deuces* or the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*. Muse and the *Plaindealer* seemed to agree that (black) folk music could transport listeners back to a cultural or emotional place critical to the black experience, just as (white) folk music was supposed to do for white Americans.

¹²⁵ Clarence Muse was an actor, musician, screenwriter, and director in the early twentieth century. He earned his degree in international law from Dickenson College in 1911, but quickly became part of the arts scene in Harlem during and after World War I.

Just as white nostalgia frequently contributed directly to the project of maintaining white supremacy, black nostalgia often contributed directly to a protest of white supremacy. Muse's signature song was a tune of his own composition that the *Plaindealer* suggested "bids fair to replace ["Carry Me Back to Old Virginia"]...as the unforgettable song of the Southlands."¹²⁶ Unfortunately, the title and lyrics of the song are not known, but it is unlikely that he wrote about "old dark'eyes" missing "old massa." To black listeners, "colored folks" singing at the "common meeting place" would have represented the black community's solidarity, survival, and persistent *humanity* in the face of brutal oppression.

James Weldon Johnson argued to an audience in 1935 that black spiritual music "represent[ed] [the] greatest single contribution to American art," while "the cowboy and hill-billy songs are debasement of music in that they came down from other forms."¹²⁷ Johnson used "Negro Folk Songs" as evidence in his argument that "the only things which sprang from American soil which are recognized all over the world as distinctly American, and which have permeated American civilization, were created by the Negro."¹²⁸ If much southern nostalgia functioned, as Grace Hale has argued, as an "autobiography of southern whiteness," it could also function as an autobiography of southern blackness, maybe even simultaneously.¹²⁹ The Edgeworth Negro Chorus and the Dixie Spiritual Singers fit neatly into the discourse of white nostalgia that much of

¹²⁶ "Clarence Muse Goes over Big in Broadcast, Chicago," *The Capital Plaindealer* (Topeka, KS), Nov. 29, 1936, 1.

¹²⁷ Erna Harris, "Johnson Rare Speaker; On the Subject: Creative Genius of the Negro," *The Negro Star* (Wichita, KS), March 29, 1935, 1.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 44.

WRVA's early programming articulated. But the programs also fit neatly into a continually evolving discourse of criticism and protest. Surviving records from the 1950s and 1960s indicate that local black residents were not only listening to WRVA, but also pressuring station officials to provide programming that either implicitly or explicitly challenged the status quo. Although there are no records one way or the other from WRVA's earliest years, it is probable that black listeners took an avid interest in WRVA from the beginning, and were keenly aware of radio's – and WRVA's – power to direct and redirect conversations about race and power “down where the South begins.”

On the first *Edgeworth Frolic Night* in 1926, WRVA officials gathered local (and inexpensive) talent in front of one microphone as an experiment in entertainment. The broadcast's celebration of local sounds and artists seemed to fulfill the station's avowed civic mission, as did *Frolic Night's* content. Hillbilly music, blackface humor, and African American spiritual singers all fit easily within the parameters of dominant Virginia tastes – certainly of working-class and middle-class whites. When *Frolic Night* was relaunched as the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* and moved to network radio, WRVA officials learned quickly that hillbilly music, blackface humor, and African American spiritual singers were also popular with large numbers of people – white men in particular – up the East Coast. Both locally and nationally, WRVA had a self-defined southern product that interested many listeners, prompting large numbers of them to send away for membership certificates. The very act of listening in, however, changed the product.

The station left behind few documents to reconstruct the full dimensions of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club's* listenership, but it clearly consisted of geographically, socially, and probably racially and ethnically diverse Americans. From the white men of *Corn Cob Pipe Club* clubs in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts to rural-dwellers in Virginia and North Carolina to black Richmonders interested in hearing their friends sing, WRVA brought together people for an evening who all undoubtedly heard different sounds, and attributed different meanings to them. The *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, as well as most of WRVA's early programming, flitted between "authentic" and "artificial" constructions of southern-ness, largely because such distinctions were highly subjective for both the broadcasters and the listeners, and because there's no such thing anyway. The exercise in creating an interracial, cultural space "down where the South begins" forced broadcasters and listeners alike to confront the muddy and muddying consequences of southern white nostalgia in a modern South, and in a modern nation.

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In the station's self-manufactured histories, and also in contemporary accounts of the station's development, observers often lumped hillbillies and black spiritual singers together. In the minds of the broadcasters, the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* and the *Edgeworth Negro Chorus* were members of the same graduating class. The combination of black spiritual singers and white hillbilly singers produced WRVA's first national "hit," and when they joined forces on the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* they transformed WRVA from a receiver to a

receiver/producer of network programming. Station officials were thrilled with the success of the program, and continued to reference it as a glorious episode in WRVA's history well into the 1950s and 1960s, long after the show had gone off the air.

Station manager Calvin Lucy and his boss William T. Reed had been excited by the possibilities that radio technology offered when they made the decision in 1925 to launch the Edgeworth station. When Lucy described radio as a "gee whiz word," he referred to the novelty, youth, and unpredictability of an industry that seemed to represent the farthest edges of a nation undergoing rapid systemic transformations. When WRVA began broadcasting in late 1925, Lucy and other station employees saw themselves as working on the front lines of a new era, which was a source of pride.

At first glance, then, it seems somewhat contradictory that the first sounds the station produced with this modern technology in a modern era were sounds of "tradition" and the past. The *Four Deuces* and the *Edgeworth Negro Chorus* both engaged with nostalgic representations of a southern past on some level, while the *Farm Reports* and the *Sunshine Hour* reinforced Virginia's – and the South's – contemporary image as a land of farmers and Christians, which it mostly was. WRVA's first experiments in programming were not dissimilar from most New York City stations' experiments: most early radio stations broadcast the sounds they could get easily and cheaply. Instead of broadcasting the accents and conversations of hyphenated Americans, in Teddy Roosevelt's

infamous phrasing, WRVA broadcast the sounds of racialized southerners going about their business.

Non-southern listeners (and perhaps also a majority of local listeners), at least in the case of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, tended to hear “tradition” and perhaps even “authenticity” in these racialized southern sounds. When a white listener from the Northeast became a “member” of WRVA’s club, he became a member of a conversation that addressed many of the political and moral dilemmas of 1920s America: the demographic shift toward massive urbanization, cultural shifts toward cosmopolitanism, the backlash of people supporting “traditional” and/or rural values, native white people’s desire to locate a common American “heritage” for the various peoples moving to the United States from other countries, social confusion related to the Great Migration, and general anxiety over the emergence of a modern America. The *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, with the steady salt-of-the-earth hillbilly humor and the deeply emotional and spiritual African American music, offered an anchor to middle-class white men who possibly felt adrift in the shifting tides of Big Business and urbanization.

But as deeper analysis of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* makes clear, “old-time” music did not necessarily make the show an “old-time” program, nor did it make WRVA and “old-time” station. WRVA won many listeners with its “old-time” programming, from the *Sunshine Hour* to the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, but the totality of WRVA’s early programming suggests that the “Voice of Virginia” was talking much more about a modern South than about the past.

Perhaps most critically, WRVA made interracial programming that was supposed to represent something essential about “the South.” In WRVA’s construction, sounds of southernness were not neatly segregated by race. The result was an amalgam – a hybrid – of often undifferentiated sounds, a cultural product that was at stark odds with the politics of the era. It was the sounds of blackness that first attracted the attention of a national audience for the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*. Despite the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*’s pretensions of being more of a “white” hillbilly program than a half-hour of “Negro” gospel, radio reviewers were more likely to remember and recommend the portions of the program involving African American performers than the hillbilly segments. This had to do not only with the quality of the singing, but with the almost total absence of black voices on the radio in the 1920s and early 1930s, and particularly on the networks. If radio was “making” America by establishing a national culture, WRVA was one of the first voices in radioland to imply that African Americans – and not white folks playing at being African Americans – held some territory in that cultural arena, even if that territory was heavily circumscribed and controlled. Arguably, the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* ceded more territory to black Virginians on the air than WRVA officials would have ever ceded to, say, black visitors to the station. The contradiction itself reflected the currents of protest that were constantly disrupting Jim Crow laws and practices in the 1920s and 1930s. In reflecting the racial confusion of 1920s and 1930s Virginia, the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* became part of a national search for a racial identity.

WRVA's programs also challenged the dialectic between supporters of "rural" and "urban" values and ways of life. From the *Farm Reports* to the *Four Deuces* and the gospel singers, "rural" and "urban" existed simultaneously. On the air, there were no clear divides between those people who worked with their hands and lived in the countryside and those who worked in factories or in offices in the city. Advertisements for the Dixie Spiritual Singers, for example, described the performers as tobacco plant workers who sang "plantation" songs. Holland Wilkinson's hymns were broadcast to the faithful, not to an allegedly devout countryside; the *Sunshine Hour* did not acknowledge the rural/fundamentalist v. urban/secular discourse that preoccupied many contemporary commentators. The *Farm Market Reports* in particular remained a steady reminder that city and country were the same community and not two different planets. People, ideas, religion, and goods all flowed easily from "rural" to "urban" in Virginia, which was a reality of life at the time, even if popular thought both within and without the region held a different view.

Even more critically, the intent behind the *Farm Market Reports* was not to entertain farmers, but to tie them directly to the economy. If the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* spoke longingly of cotton and tobacco fields, the *Farm Market Reports* commodified every acre of them for a profit-minded agricultural businessman. WRVA's fluid treatment of Virginia's space, and a corresponding fluid treatment of the people who inhabited that space, reflected a southern state in motion. Changes wrought by war, agricultural advancement, Jim Crow, women's suffrage, municipal and government reform, and increasingly persistent black

activism created a shifting terrain on which southerners scrambled to impose order. Either intentionally or (more likely) unintentionally, WRVA broadcast the shifting terrain even though station officials were personally invested in maintaining Harry Byrd's form of social order.

Grace Hale argues that conceptions of the "Old South" "provided white southerners, particularly a modern middle class in the process of formation, with perhaps their most abundant postwar [Civil War] resources, a strangely other time and space within which first to deny and escape the present and then to reconstruct the foundations of racial difference."¹³⁰ The *Four Deuces* and the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* each did the work of white southern mythologizing, but as a technology, radio resisted the sort of one-sided, streamlined messaging that would have been necessary to perpetuate the appearance of uniform hierarchy and stability.

Disembodied voices brought sounds of blackness and sounds of whiteness into the homes of Virginia listeners and listeners from much farther abroad. The interracial cast of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* contrasted sharply with practices of segregation that separated African Americans from whites in almost all regions of the country, but most especially with Jim Crow states like Virginia. Radio, too, paid little regard to color lines, bringing the music of black men into the kitchens of white families, presidents into the kitchens of black families, bad hillbilly jokes into the parlors of native-born Northeastern WASPs, and the going rate for animal flesh into the chambers of state politicians. WRVA was not disrupting white southern nostalgia so much as it was exposing its irrelevance in

¹³⁰ Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 44.

a transformed and transforming region. No matter how many moonlit nights the hillbilly ensemble sang about on the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, the Edgeworth Negro Chorus was next at the microphone singing about God and redemption. And no matter how far in the past WRVA set the *Four Deuces*, cutting-edge technology was beaming the old ballads out into the world at 5,000 watts (and later at 50,000 watts), collapsing time and space so that anyone in the world could travel to the door “where the South begins” instantaneously. WRVA adopted “old-time” programming, but ultimately revealed the complexity of the modern South. Sounds of yesterday became sounds of confusion as local and non-local listeners picked through the station’s offerings to construct their own understandings of Virginia’s, or the South’s, or America’s past, as well as the direction of its future.

Chapter 2

50,000 Watts of Noise: The Rise of Calvin T. Lucy

On the night of March 17, 1939, WRVA flipped the switch to turn on the 50,000-watt transmitter, becoming the newest of the dozen or so stations that had a license to transmit with so much power. The president of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) sent station manager Calvin Lucy a congratulatory telegram:

Best wishes on the opening of your new transmitter. With its increased powr [sic] and new modern equipment WRVA will add luster to its proud record of service to the people of Richmond, the state of Virginia and the many other communities it serves. Larus Brothers are to be congratulated ontheir [sic] progressiveness in rendering this greater service and under your able guidance and management WRVA will continue to march forward in its contribution to the art of radio.¹

Acquiring the license to broadcast at 50,000 watts was an ardent desire of Lucy's. He had worked toward it for the better part of a decade, making the right friends in the radio business, positioning WRVA as Virginia's premier radio station, and cultivating the support and protection of some of the most powerful men in Richmond. When WRVA had gone on the air in 1925, the future of broadcasting was far from clear. But by the time WRVA became a 50,000-watt, national clear-channel station in 1939, American broadcasting was reshaping American politics and culture.

When WRVA was in its infancy, radio broadcasting was barely out of diapers. Early radio boosters may have been united in their excitement about the new technology, but they held widely different expectations for it. For much of the early 1930s, observers debated the relative merits of a so-called British

¹ Edwin Spence to CTL, March 17, 1939, VCU: Lucy Papers.

system in which radio was a “public corporation,” and those of a so-called American system in which radio was left in the hands of private enterprise.² That observers had begun to describe the profit-driven model as the “American way” as early as 1931 foreshadowed the debate’s resolution.³ But the passage of the Communications Act of 1934, which formalized the model of commercial broadcasting that powerful stations such as NBC and CBS had lobbied for, was only the beginning of a complex debate about the opportunities for and responsibilities of radio in a democracy.

The passage of the Communications Act may have resolved a legal debate, but it only catalyzed a broader, politicized debate about media in the United States. “And as with so many other revolutions in our habits introduced by the machine, men begin to wonder if the new phenomenon is a step towards their heaven or another landmark on the road to hell,” wrote Harrison Brown in December of 1934. Would commercialized radio, as Brown speculated, “[place] a heavy handicap on the use of the new instrument as a means of raising the general level of taste and intelligence”?⁴ Or even more ominously, would radio

² Stephen King-Hall used the term “public corporation” in 1934, defining British regulation of radio as “a hybrid growth” of public concern and private enterprise to meet the demands of “certain services which are considered to be of such vital importance to the welfare of the whole community that it is undesirable that they should be left entirely in the hands of private enterprise whose policy...would be based very largely on purely financial considerations.” Stephen King-Hall, “Radio – The British Way,” *The Rotarian* 44 (May 1934): 12-13. Quotation from page 12.

³ Sir John Reith, director general of radio in England, opined: “I cannot become reconciled to the American way of regulating radio...Radio as a medium is far too wonderful to be put into the category of advertising.” I have not found a reference to the “American way” of radio regulation that predates this one. “Radio Differs Across the Sea,” *New York Times*, May 31, 1931, 9.

⁴ Brown, an Englishman, suggested a gloomy future for American radio now that it had systemically chosen commercialism. “In the long run it will probably be seen that a people gets the radio it deserves, but there can be no doubt that such a system of open commercial competition as the American, places a heavy handicap on the use of the new instrument as a means of raising the general level of taste and intelligence.” Harrison Brown, “Radio under Fire,” *The Fortnightly* 136 (December 1934): 663-672.

become so powerful that it assumed the role of a fourth branch of government, but without the checks and balances of the electoral and legislative processes? Dark fears about the corrosive potential of mass media, and even about the very sustainability of democracy, lurked beneath the widespread enthusiasm of the “Golden Age” of radio in the 1930s.⁵

WRVA officials seemingly shared none of the reservations about radio’s political power that leading intellectuals expressed. They accepted from the beginning that radio – at least in Virginia – would have to find a home within the immensely complex system of hierarchies and customs governing performances of race, gender, or class in the Jim Crow state. Put more simply, radio was “politics,” just as everything else was. For station manager Calvin T. Lucy and many of his colleagues, the debate about radio’s potential effects on democracy was considerably less relevant than an urgent need to court favor among the Commonwealth’s elite to ensure the station’s survival and prosperity. But while WRVA officials went about their business as though radio were no different than any other cultural medium before it, they were deceived. Radio could not be entirely contained by the forces of Harry Byrd’s Virginia.

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⁵ David Jenemann has argued persuasively that one of the leading intellectuals of the 1930s, Theodor Adorno, considered his work on radio to be of utmost importance, though little of it was published at the time. Adorno feared the potentially manipulative power of the “radio voice” because it delivered sounds (opinions, news items, jokes) without leaving room for conversation. Because a listener could not argue with the radio voice, to Adorno’s way of thinking, the voice became the infallible voice of truth or voice of God, delivering information and opinions from which there could be no dissent. David Jenemann, *Adorno in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007): 64. See also Jenemann’s second chapter, “Adorno in Sponsor-Land: Authority on the Radio.” In this formulation, radio was a distinctly authoritarian institution, and could destroy free, democratic speech even as it pretended to elevate it.

Calvin Tompkins Lucy was not exactly a Horatio Alger hero. Born in 1891 to a loving, lower-middle-class family trying to improve their lot in life, Lucy never lived in rags and probably never went hungry. As a white boy in turn-of-the-century Baltimore, Lucy could attend the best public schools that Maryland had to offer, take advantage of the new cultural and social opportunities provided by a booming city as a young man, and ultimately expect to join his family's sewing machine business when the time came.⁶ Though his family's economic situation waxed and waned in the mercurial economy, and though a brief but unhappy stint with the U.S. Army delayed him, Calvin Lucy's path to a secure future was never seriously obstructed.

No matter how secure his middle-class future, it was still unlikely that the skinny kid from Baltimore would grow up to become the Vice President of Radio-Television for Larus & Brother Tobacco Company. And it was perhaps even less likely that he would become the captain of one of the most powerful radio stations in the country, regularly making himself useful to some of the most influential politicians of his time and place (and vice versa). Yet, despite the improbability of Lucy's success, his story was in some ways unremarkable. The road between 1641 North Fulton Avenue in Baltimore, with its "chickens and

⁶ In 1914, educators Abraham Flexner and Frank P. Bachman prepared a report for the newly created Maryland Educational Survey Commission that found public education in the state was "on the whole soundly organized," but that it produced "extremely unsatisfactory results." Chief among the educators' complaints was that only three-quarters of Maryland's white children went to school, and of these only about half progressed beyond the fifth grade. Nevertheless, Lucy and his brothers were able to attain the best primary and secondary public education in Maryland at the time – an education that was likely unavailable to their parents. William Lloyd Fox, "Socio-Cultural Developments from the Civil War to 1920," in *Maryland: A History, 1632-1974*, eds. Richard Walsh and William Lloyd Fox (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1974), 499-589, 517. Baseball seemed to be a particular favorite of the Lucy boys. Mother to [Blanche Lucy], 27 April 1908, LVA: Lucy Family Papers.

nuisances” in the back yard, and his executive office at Larus and Brother in downtown Richmond proved to be a fairly straightforward one.⁷ Naturally, hard work, ingenuity, and luck were critical to his success, but so was a disruption of the social order that had governed Virginia’s politics and economy for decades. Throughout his career Calvin Lucy was more interested in playing the game than gaming the system, but his ascension ultimately helped undermine the very hierarchy he had invested in.

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Lucy’s parents, Calvin Herbert Lucy and Blanche Tompkins Lucy, built a comfortable enough life for their children. They owned a home about two miles northeast of the inner harbor in Baltimore, and did not seem to lack for the necessities of life even if they could not afford many of its niceties.⁸ Calvin Herbert Lucy had grown up on a farm in Virginia in the decades after the Civil War, but had come to Baltimore with his bride.⁹ There, he had made a living in the sewing business, probably working first as a tailor before eventually acting as a broker between sewing machine manufacturers like Singer and the “pants-makers and blouse-makers” of Baltimore.¹⁰ Given the trajectory of his father’s career – the one-time tailor had progressed to the decidedly white-collar status of the corporate representative by 1917 or 1918 – it is altogether likely that the

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ They made their own clothes, for example, but hired other women, almost certainly not of the middle class, to wash them. Ibid.

⁹ In 1945, Calvin T. Lucy claimed to have “inherited” his “farming instinct” from his father. CTL to Starling Busser, Pittsburgh, PA, Sept. 27, 1945, LVA: Lucy Family Papers.

¹⁰ The fact that he tinkered with the sewing machines and even successfully sold the rights to one of his inventions to Singer, a “Circular Feed Device,” indicates that he had an intimate knowledge of the craft of tailoring, which suggests that perhaps he had, at one time, been one of the pants-makers and blouse-makers to whom he later sold machines Calvin H. Lucy to Singer Sewing Machine Co., New York, Jan. 12, 1921, LVA: Lucy Family Papers.

Lucys were an upwardly mobile family during Calvin's childhood and adolescence.¹¹

The Baltimore of Lucy's childhood was on the fast track. It had always been a city of commerce, but it was quickly becoming a city of industry as well. Nowhere was this more evident than in the clothes-making business, in which Baltimore "practically dominated the southern market for boys' and men's clothing" by 1895.¹² The booming textiles market was, no doubt, part of the reason that Calvin H. Lucy was able to advance his career. Historian Eleanor Bruchey's analysis of several decades of Baltimore's and Maryland's census data indicates that Baltimore was at the peak of its industrial preeminence and prosperity at the time of young Lucy's birth, before rapidly losing ground during the next two decades.¹³ It was a city of southern goods and a northeastern way of doing business.

Lucy joined the stream of young men training for the growing clerical class that large manufacturing centers made possible. He attended Baltimore City College, the modern-day equivalent of a high school, where he was at the forefront of a sudden explosion of American youths seeking and obtaining secondary educations in order to propel themselves into white-collar work.¹⁴

¹¹ Business card for C.H. Lucy, LVA: Lucy Family Papers.

¹² Eleanor Bruchey, "The Industrialization of Maryland, 1860-1914" in *Maryland: A History, 1632-1974*, eds. Richard Walsh and William Lloyd Fox (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1974), 413-414.

¹³ By 1910, Baltimore accounted for a mere 59 percent of Maryland's total value in products, down from almost 83 percent twenty years earlier. Never "an industrial giant," Bruchey continues, Baltimore in particular and Maryland in general were not able to maintain the fast pace of growth into the twentieth century, and quickly lost business to bigger cities with more capital and larger pools of cheap labor. Bruchey, "The Industrialization of Maryland," 401-403.

¹⁴ Economist and historian Claudia Goldin has argued that an "education belt" emerged in the United States from about 1910 to 1920, in which young men began choosing to stay in school

After graduating in 1910, Lucy began taking post-graduate courses in business, and later that year the nineteen-year-old landed an office position with the Crown Cork and Seal Company of Baltimore.¹⁵ Where Lucy's father had probably started off by working with his hands before graduating to the position of a salesman, Calvin Lucy began his professional career as a white-collar employee. He worked as a "clerk, typist, bookkeeper and Production Order Manager" for Crown Cork, all while taking further business courses at Baltimore City College's night school.¹⁶ Lucy took advantage of all the opportunities that the Progressive Era and the rise of Big Business could offer a white boy from Baltimore, moving swiftly from a new kind of school to a new kind of job. In many ways, Lucy was a child of the Northeast.

But in many other ways, he was not. Even though Baltimore's rapidly growing industry modeled itself on the Northeast, many residents identified culturally with southerners rather than northerners, most especially whites. H.L. Mencken, possibly Baltimore's most famous writer of all time, spent considerable time and ink lampooning "The South." His essay "The Sahara of the Bozart," which first ran in the New York *Evening Mail* in 1917, condemned the South as a cultural wasteland full of unthinking degenerates.¹⁷ But for all his animus,

over taking a manufacturing job. Such a decision was a calculated strategy to jump into or maintain status in the growing middle class. Lucy was undoubtedly making the same calculation. Claudia Goldin, "America's Graduation from High School: The Evolution and Spread of Secondary Schooling in the Twentieth Century," *The Journal of Economic History* 58 (June 1998): 345-374.

¹⁵ CTL Resumé from 1960, LVA: WRVA Radio.

¹⁶ Formal resumé of CTL, ca. 1953, LVA: WRVA Radio.

¹⁷ Mencken was renowned for his acid pen, but "The Sahara of the Bozart" is unusually vicious, even by his standards. "If the whole of the late Confederacy were to be engulfed by a tidal wave tomorrow, the effect upon the civilized minority of men in the world would be but little greater than that of a flood on the Yang-tse-kiang." By placing people of the South outside the hierarchy of

Mencken wrote more often about virtues of gentility, charm, gallantry, all of which he associated with an "Old" South where boundaries of race and class were carefully choreographed and indelible.¹⁸ Mencken made it particularly clear on more than one occasion that he lamented the passing of the Confederacy: "The chief evils in the Federal victory lay in the fact, from which we still suffer abominably, that it was a victory of what we now call Babbitts over what used to be called gentlemen."¹⁹ Better that the South should have won, he argued, because now New York was in danger of becoming the seat of American civilization. For Mencken, and for many other white Baltimoreans, the antebellum "way of life" they perceived in the southern states was preferable to the contemporary "way of life" in northeastern cities.²⁰

At the turn of the century, many Baltimoreans could still recall a time when Maryland's white citizens were allowed to own African Americans. The state itself had not picked up arms to defend slavery, but almost a third of the 115,000 Maryland men who enlisted in the military fought for the Confederacy. And if memories of slavery and the Civil War were somewhat remote, Jim Crow was

civilization, he was not only accusing them of being useless, but of not being part of a dominant race. Such an accusation provoked ferocious backlash from white southerners, despite the reverence he professed in the same essay for the "Old South." H.L. Mencken, "The Sahara of the Bozart," *New York Evening Mail* (Nov. 13, 1917). Republished in H.L. Mencken, ed., *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 184-195.

¹⁸ In historian John Kneebone's words, "no worshipper at the shrines of the Lost Cause exceeded Mencken's admiration for the antebellum southern aristocrat, the flower of a civilization destroyed in war and now supplanted by the poor whites and their demagogic leaders." John T. Kneebone, *Southern Liberal Journalism and the Issue of Race, 1920-1944* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 23.

¹⁹ H.L. Mencken, "The Calamity of Appomattox," *American Mercury* (Sept. 1930): 29-31. Republished in Mencken, ed., *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 196-199.

²⁰ In "On Living in Baltimore," Mencken compares the cities directly and proclaims New York to be "dreadful," even though he had kept an office in Manhattan for more than two decades, and had made all of his money there. H.L. Mencken, "On Living in Baltimore," *Baltimore Evening Sun* (Feb. 6, 1925). Republished in Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, ed., *The Impossible H.L. Mencken* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 125-128.

clear and present. Following the lead of southern states like Virginia, the Maryland legislature entertained proposals for a series of Jim Crow laws in the first few years of the twentieth century. Baltimore's black residents successfully protested the "Separate Car Law" in 1902, but could not stop the racial segregation of public schools or neighborhoods.²¹ On the one hand, city leaders were doing everything in their power to court the wealth and power of New York businesses. But on the other hand, the city sometimes represented the "Sahara of the Bozart" more than Mencken acknowledged.

Lucy and his brothers were born and grew up in Baltimore, but they also considered Virginia their home. Their parents had been born in Virginia and Lucy's maternal grandparents continued to live in Richmond. "[I] was born in Baltimore of a Virginia family," he was fond of saying.²² Lucy and his family made the journey to Richmond many times during Lucy's childhood, but the family was connected to Virginia through more than kinship. From the time he was a young boy, Calvin Lucy struggled to define a southern identity for himself. Although he lived in a booming, industrial city that had offered him new opportunities he had seized with enthusiasm, he referred to himself as an

²¹ The *Baltimore Afro-American* reported that black women were particularly vociferous in their opposition to proposed Jim Crow train cars. "Not Regarded as a Democratic Measure," *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 25, 1902, 1; "Killed the Jim Crow Car Bill," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 1, 1902, 1. For a detailed contemporary analysis of Jim Crow's official and unofficial effects in Baltimore, see W. Ashbie Hawkins, "A Year of Segregation in Baltimore," *The Crisis* 3 (1911): 27.

²² Over the course of his nearly four decades in broadcasting, Lucy made sure his press releases illustrated his claim to Virginia ancestry. When he was formally introduced to the field in a 1935 *Broadcasting* magazine, his biography began "He was born in Baltimore of a Virginia family on October 8, 1891." The fact that he emphasized his Virginia connections even in private correspondence suggests that he did so for reasons that were not entirely related to his position at WRVA. CTL Scrapbook, LVA: Lucy Family Papers.

“unreconstructed rebel,” and became defensive later in life if anyone expressed doubt over his loyalties to the South.²³

When Calvin Lucy moved to Richmond in 1912 to take a job at Larus & Brother Company, he brought with him both the expectations of his “modern” education, and the nascent social and racial conservatism of a white southerner. He found much to admire in the thrill of city life, and letters sent home to a school buddy reflect an air of unbridled boosterism for his new home.²⁴ But could an “unreconstructed rebel” also be a city booster? Could a self-identified [white] southerner embrace northeastern industry and commerce but maintain a distinct regional identity? Just as his family straddled social classes, and just as he and his brothers straddled the Maryland-Virginia line, Calvin Tompkins Lucy would have to find a middle ground between the forces of change that brought him to Richmond, and the forces of tradition that kept him there.

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Of course he did not know it for several years, but when young Calvin Lucy came to work for a Richmond tobacco firm, he had landed smack in the middle of what would become “Harry Byrd’s Virginia.”²⁵ In Richmond and

²³ To cite just one example, when Lucy wrote a letter to Richmond mayor Claude Woodward in 1961 protesting the razing of John Marshall High School, he signed it as an “unreconstructed rebel.” CTL to Claude Woodward, 1961, VCU: Lucy Papers.

²⁴ Lucy was particularly proud of Richmond having a professional baseball team and one of the brand new Federal Reserve Banks, two things that Baltimore was “not...ready for.” CTL to Joseph “Joe” A. Bull, March 15, 1916, VCU: Lucy Papers.

²⁵ The term “Harry Byrd’s Virginia” is, of course, shorthand for the vastly complex systems of power that maintained and regulated divisions between and opportunities for Virginians from about 1920 into the early 1960s. I have borrowed it from historian William Crawley, who used it in his biography *William Tuck: A Political Life in Harry Byrd’s Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978). I will use the term periodically as a reminder that political exclusion, resistance to the federal government, and widespread discrimination were not accidental phenomena, but the consequences of deliberate policies on the part of self-conscious social and political architects, like Harry Byrd.

Virginia, the period following the Great War was defined by tentative progressivism. Despite a widespread wariness of social change, Virginians began experimenting with revised social arrangements that permitted a greater degree of latitude for individual enterprise – particularly for white men. As a young man, Calvin Lucy took up a position as a clerk in a tobacco firm with high expectations for his future. He was a man on the make in a booming southern city, at the same time and in the same place as Harry Byrd, and his journey illuminates much about the avenues for advancement – and the dead ends – for the ambitions of an average sort of white man in Harry Byrd's Virginia.

When Calvin Lucy came to Richmond in 1912, he caused all kinds of trouble. The 21-year-old office clerk found much to love about his new home and his new life, and he threw himself into his work with an enthusiasm that scandalized his co-workers. He started as an "office manager" because he "could type, take some shorthand and do bookkeeping." "It was a two man office – only the boss and me," he wrote in 1965. "I thoroughly enjoyed the diversification of duties and even helped operate cigarette packing machines after the office closed."²⁶ By his own account, Lucy was somewhat of a renegade in the firm. He encountered bookkeeping protocols that dated from the company's establishment in 1877, and the "big boss instructed [him] to make any changes [he] thought would increase efficiency and expedite the handling of office operations generally." He introduced his office to a typewriter, and boasted about revolutionizing their bookkeeping with it. These "innovations," as he called

²⁶ CT to Aaron [Joe] Bull, Spring 1965, VCU: Lucy Papers.

them, “did not help my popularity with many of the ‘old timers,’ one of whom told the big boss I was a ‘brash whippersnapper.’”²⁷

Lucy had been born in a city that was riding high on a wave of prosperity made possible by the rise of Big Business and national commercial markets. He had received a better education than the generation of Baltimoreans before him, having access not only to public high schools but also to a curriculum that gave him an opportunity to study business instead of Latin or elocution. Moreover, his business classes had introduced him to the theories of scientific management and business efficiency that were transforming the American workplace.²⁸ He grew up amid optimistic predictions of continued growth and limitless potential for Big Business, and he brought these beliefs with him to his job with Larus and Brother. A miserable stint in the U.S. Army in 1918 only reinforced his faith in the possibilities and thrills of modern business.²⁹ Lucy did not enjoy making the world safe for democracy, but was genuinely enthusiastic about contributing to the expansion and modernization of Larus and Brother.

Lucy’s enthusiasm for innovation might have been out of place just a decade earlier, but thanks to a personnel change and a fire, the firm was undergoing something of a shake-up when Lucy came along in 1912. The

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ For an excellent discussion of theories of efficiency in the turn-of-the-century workplace, please see Olivier Zunz, *Making America Corporate, 1870-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²⁹ Lucy did not enjoy being a soldier. When Lucy began basic training at Camp Lee as a buck private, he had two goals: the first was to survive, and the second was to learn skills that would help him achieve the first. His rare comments on his service do not include references to honor, glory, patriotism, or defense of his homeland. Nor does he mention camaraderie, or loyalty to his group. Rather, he had detailed memories of being cold and wet, of injustices done to him by commanding officers, and of his great if not ingenious victory over bureaucracy that got him out of the army as fast as possible. CTL to Joe Bull, Jan. 31, 1966, VCU: Lucy Papers.

company's last surviving founder, Charles Larus, passed away in 1908, and then-vice president William T. Reed was elected to take his place. Reed was younger and had new ideas about the future of tobacco. Larus and Brother, like most of the other firms at the time, made most of its money on pipe tobacco. Reed thought cigarettes were the emerging market, however, and Larus and Brother Company absorbed a cigarette manufacturing firm the same year that Lucy came to Richmond.³⁰ Reed never had to refit his tobacco plant for cigarette manufacturing because, as luck would have it, the old Larus plant burned down in 1912, probably just before Lucy got there. A brand-new plant was immediately constructed on the same site on Richmond's "Tobacco Row," a strip along the canal just east of Richmond's business district. When Lucy first began working for Larus and Brother, he entered a business that was reinventing itself, physically and commercially. When he was in his seventies, Lucy looked back on his big Richmond career move as an ideal decision and an exciting time in his life.³¹

Lucy stayed with Larus and Brother until his young career was interrupted by the First World War. Once demobilized, he returned to the firm in late 1918 or early 1919 and assumed more professional and personal responsibilities. He resumed his former job as an office manager, but was also an assistant to the advertising and sales manager, and acted as an assistant purchasing agent from time to time. He devoted considerable time to monitoring wholesale tobacco

³⁰ William Reed and his brothers Pleasant and John jointly purchased the Vaughan-Ware Tobacco Company in 1912. Though Reed quickly transferred ownership of the "Reed Tobacco Company" to Larus and Brother, he and his brothers always thought of the cigarette business as their personal if not private venture. *75 Years: Larus and Brother Co.*, VCU: Lucy Papers.

³¹ CTL to Joe Bull, 1965, VCU: Lucy Papers.

prices to maximize Larus and Brother's profit margin.³² Gradually, Lucy's position at Larus and Brother became more secure, and his salary probably increased a little as well. At any rate, he felt secure enough about his affairs in 1920 that he married his sweetheart, Kathleen Baseler.

Kathleen Baseler was a Richmond girl, born in 1895 at 401 N. Fourth Street, just two blocks away from where Maggie Walker and other upper-class African Americans built stately homes in the heart of Jackson Ward.³³ Throughout her childhood, Baseler's family moved steadily eastward toward the center of downtown, possibly in response to the shifting racial and commercial boundaries of Richmond's neighborhoods.³⁴ She graduated from Massey Business College and worked at the Anderson Label Printing Company and the Richmond Stove Company before marrying Calvin T. Lucy in June 1920. According to her obituary, "her earnings as a single working woman enabled her family to buy back the mortgage on Clifton, the Samuel family homeplace in Caroline County which had been lost with other family assets in the aftermath of the War Between the States."³⁵ Baseler was not so different from Lucy, really. She was also born into a white, middle-class family that was vulnerable to the vagaries of the economy. She took advantage of educational opportunities that

³² Retirement press release, July 26, 1961, LVA: WRVA Radio. See also "'C.T.' Lucy Retiring after WRVA Career of 36 Years," *Southern Advertising and Publishing*, Aug. 15, 1961, 31.

³³ Kathleen Baseler Lucy, obituary, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Dec. 26, 1989, B2.

³⁴ Her first home abutted the largest black neighborhood in Richmond. In fact, Kathleen Baseler and African American businesswoman Maggie Lena Walker lived very close to one another for a period of time. For a glimpse into the African American world that existed right outside the Baseler's home, please see Elsa Barkley Brown, "Constructing a Life and a Community: A Partial Story of Maggie Lena Walker," *OAH Magazine of History* (Summer 1993): 28-31. Her second home was demolished to make way for the Hotel Richmond. Ironically, WRVA would build studios inside the Hotel Richmond, meaning that her husband went to work on top of her old home. Kathleen Baseler Lucy, obituary, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Dec. 26, 1989, B2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

had not been available to young women even a decade earlier. Moreover, Baseler was pushing the envelope in early-twentieth-century Richmond. Not only did she seek paid work outside the home – a relatively new phenomenon for white women of the southern middle class – but she also used her wages to help support her family, in a manner of speaking. Like Lucy, Kathleen Baseler was part of the clerical revolution that was transforming gender norms and expectations of class.

By 1925, the bright young man from Baltimore had achieved many of the era's normative hallmarks of success: he had a secure position with managerial responsibility, he got along well with his colleagues, and he had a wife and daughter. He was well on his way to becoming one of the "Babbitts" that H.L. Mencken so deplored, and there is every indication that he was pleased with his life.³⁶ After all, the tailor's son had exchanged chickens and sewing machines for a steady life in middle management in the city he had always loved. But as luck or fate or human device would have it, Calvin Lucy would never be a Babbitt.

★

When Larus and Brother decided to push ahead in 1925 with Pleasant Reed's idea for a radio station, Reed selected 34-year-old Calvin Lucy for the task. Lucy most likely got the job because of his experience in sales and advertising, as business-owned radio stations were primarily advertising ventures at that point. KDKA in Pittsburgh, widely recognized as the first commercial radio station in the United States, got its start in 1920 by using the new technology to

³⁶ *Babbitt*, first published in 1922, was Sinclair Lewis's harsh critique of the lack of substance in the life of the average, middle-class white businessman.

advertise radio sets available for purchase at the Joseph Horne Company department store.³⁷ Reed had a similar idea: his radio station would go on the air a few times a week for a couple hours at a time, pitching Larus and Brother tobacco. In twenty-first-century terms, the early vision for WRVA was more like a twitter campaign than anything to do with broadcasting. Who better to launch it than the dependable office manager and ad-man who had always shown an interest in innovation?

Looking back on the turning point in his career, Lucy claimed that “radio was still a ‘gee whiz’ word when the entire responsibility for building and running a broadcasting station was handed [to] him.”³⁸ Lucy and his boss William T. Reed, who had been given oversight of the assignment, did some quick research into radio broadcasting, and within the year they presented Larus and Brother Company, as well as the city of Richmond and the state of Virginia, with a fully operational, high-powered radio station. Lucy’s successful handling of the out-of-the-blue assignment convinced his bosses that he was the natural choice to run the station, and William Reed appointed him “General Manager.” Within the space of six to eight months in 1925, Lucy had unknowingly fallen into a second career. Although technically he continued to work as an “Office Manager” for

³⁷ Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 43-44.

³⁸ *WRVA: Twenty-Fifth Anniversary*, VCU: Lucy Papers. Like Charles Larus and Pleasant Reed, Lucy had played around with “long distance listening,” a hobby that involved using an outside antenna to pick up signals from as far away as possible. Lucy had a “two tube battery Radiola,” and used about 50 feet of wire for his antenna. CTL to “Ted,” Feb. 17, 1976, LVA: WRVA Radio. The radio model Lucy most likely had was the RCA Victor Company Radiola III, Type R1, which was produced in 1924. He could have purchased the two-tube, battery operated device for around \$35, which would have included a set of headphones. Radio was most likely a solitary hobby for him, as he would have needed to shell out an additional \$65 for a speaker that would transmit sound to more than one person at a time. For a more detailed description of early long-distance listening, please see Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, chapter 2: “How Far Can You Hear?” Specifically, see pages 42-43.

Larus and Brother Company until 1933, Calvin T. Lucy had jumped right out of middle management and propelled himself into the upper echelons of Virginia's most influential citizens.

When WRVA first went on the air in 1925, the station made a public declaration of its dedication to civic service. Even when the station adopted a commercial model – selling advertisements to turn a profit – it reaffirmed its commitment to civic service by continuing to support educational, religious, informative, and culturally uplifting programming. Larus and Brother continued to advertise its selfless service to the city and state well into the 1960s, leveraging this “commitment” into ever-more powerful transmitting licenses from the Federal Communications Commission.

There is every indication that, on the whole, Larus and Brother Company officials and WRVA officials believed they were serving a greater purpose than the mere advancement of Larus's business interests; so when they expressed a commitment to their community they were not insincere. But the station had an additional commitment that was largely unarticulated but no less influential for WRVA's future: Larus executives and station officials wanted to incorporate radio into Virginia's political culture. Calvin T. Lucy courted the favor and cooperation of powerful people in early- to mid-century Virginia, partly to secure the station's position, and partly to secure his own. Reed and Lucy undoubtedly expected that radio would serve existing political interests, which was one reason they hastened to align the station with the white Democratic party that ruled Virginia. Radio, as its stewards at WRVA would find out, did not neatly align with any

particular political party or interest, however, and the “Voice of Virginia” became arguably the most powerful and least predictable political tool in the Commonwealth.

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It was hardly surprising that Calvin Lucy used his position as station manager to cultivate relationships with the movers and shakers in Virginia politics and business; he had started the process of cultivating relationships with Virginia’s elites long before radio. His boss, William T. Reed, was one of the most politically influential of Richmond’s tobacco barons, and Lucy held him in great esteem.³⁹ When Reed died in 1935, his front-page *Richmond Times-Dispatch* obituary described him as an “industrial leader,” a “nationally known financier,” a “prominent Richmond philanthropist,” a “tobacco magnate,” and “a respected and beloved citizen.”⁴⁰ Reed was one of a small number of Virginians who had a virtual monopoly on wealth and power in the Commonwealth, and Lucy attached his fortunes to him.

William Reed, already a member of the elite society of white, wealthy businessmen who more or less governed Virginia at the time, undoubtedly expected that WRVA would serve the interests of his class. Pippa Holloway has argued persuasively that “a fairly homogenous group of white elite males worked to advance a shared economic and political agenda” in early- to mid-century

³⁹ Lucy spoke fondly of him often. Lucy wrote of Reed in 1960, “Mr. William T. Reed, Sr., often came to my rescue when situations developed which only a man of his ability and experience had the answers.” CTL History [personal], LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁴⁰ Reed held a number of important positions: he was a director of the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad, and the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company; chairman of the board of visitors of the Medical College of Virginia; chairman of the finance committee of Union Theological Seminary, and the list goes on. “State Mourns Death of Reed; Funeral Today,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Sept. 20, 1935, 1, 7.

Virginia, and did so by acting with remarkable solidarity when it came to selecting Virginia's politicians, and deciding who could and could not cast a vote in the Commonwealth.⁴¹ They guarded their privileges jealously, and men who were not born into the privileges of wealth and/or whiteness had little hope of competing against them. When WRVA articulated its mission to act on behalf of "the city's sake," it was also articulating the mission of paternalism that gave authority to men like Reed⁴²

Even if WRVA's chief executive had not already been a part of the inner circle, the station would have had to make friends among the elite if it hoped to survive. It is therefore unremarkable that Lucy invited a prominent clergyman, the mayor of Richmond, an outgoing governor, and Harry F. Byrd (introduced as the "next" Virginia governor, even though the election was ongoing) to participate in WRVA's inaugural broadcast on November 2, 1925.⁴³ What is more remarkable, though still not entirely surprising, is that Lucy also made calculated efforts to court the relationships of Virginia's political elite *on a personal level*.⁴⁴ Why would a white middle-class man – one who had profited from expansion of educational and professional opportunities – want to win acceptance from a cabal of Virginia elites who were working to restrict those opportunities?

In *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia*, Pippa Holloway carefully dissects the ways in which white elites "built a state that reflected their

⁴¹ Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia*, 7.

⁴² "WRVA and Its Operators," *Richmond News Leader*, Nov. 2, 1925, 8.

⁴³ "Radio Station Opens Here Officially," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Nov. 2, 1925, 1.

⁴⁴ See, for example, his decades-long correspondence with Harry Byrd. He sent and received congratulations telegrams, birthday cards, and personal messages regularly.

commitment to political dominance based on race and class.”⁴⁵ They did this not only through explicit legislation like the poll tax or the Racial Integrity Law, but also through social and cultural regulation. Specifically, Holloway explores the ways in which white elites attempted to impose sexual order on a burgeoning middle class before middle-class whites lost a sense of deference to their “betters” that was critical for the perpetuation of the status quo. Historian J. Douglas Smith found a similar phenomenon on a broader scale, which he outlines in his book *Managing White Supremacy*. Men like William T. Reed, Harry Byrd, and *Richmond News Leader* editor Douglas Freeman, pursued a strategy referred to as “the Virginia Way” from the 1920s through World War II: “perpetually suspicious of democracy and fervently convinced that only the upper orders should govern, white elites in Virginia embraced a concept of managed race relations that emphasized a particularly genteel brand of paternalism.”⁴⁶ It was an all-out campaign: prevent the emerging white middle class from aligning itself with the white working class, and cultivate the loyalty and deference of all whites by “peacefully” reinforcing the color line.

Lucy was no renegade. Instead of using his position to revise the discourse of paternalism that buttressed Virginia’s political culture, he became a foot-soldier in the campaign to perpetuate the “Virginia Way.” Holloway identifies a number of whites, whom she refers to as “upper-middle-class,” who “played a key role in serving the state, and thus protecting elite interests, by working as government bureaucrats, members of the law enforcement and justice systems,

⁴⁵ Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia*, 1.

⁴⁶ Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 4.

social workers, and more.”⁴⁷ As an employee of Larus and Brother, and as the manager of a radio station, Lucy was not an explicit agent of the state but he nevertheless played a part in the project to “manage white supremacy,” in J. Douglas Smith’s language. When he performed with the *Four Deuces*, he relied heavily on blackface and Lost Cause nostalgia to entertain his audience, all of which reinforced ideologies of white supremacy and black inferiority. He micromanaged the financial affairs of his employees, assuming the same I-know-best-attitude over his employees’ personal financial decisions as the state’s Board of Censors assumed over people’s choices for entertainment.⁴⁸ And, crucially, he was a firm critic of unionization or anything that smelled like it, and he let his employees know that they needed to share his convictions.⁴⁹ But perhaps more than anything, it was his efforts to establish a personal connection to Harry F. Byrd that underscored his commitment to the “Virginia Way.”

⁴⁷ Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia*, 8.

⁴⁸ Sometime between 1937 and 1941, Lucy loaned “financial planning” booklets to his employees, implying that he would be happy to review their savings plans personally. WRVA Personnel, 1933-1941, Records of WRVA Radio Station, Special Collections Dept., University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA. Hereafter cited as UVA: WRVA Radio. The state Board of Censors, Holloway argues, used its control over cinematic material to “preserve the hierarchies of race, class, and gender that produced and sustained the campaigns for eugenic sterilization and racial integrity.” Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia*, 67-72, quotation from 67. I doubt that Lucy had any explicit goal in suggesting savings plans for his employees. It is more likely that he was imposing a general set of values that he deemed superior – values like thrift and caution that resonated with the image of the white middle class that white elites were eager to encourage.

⁴⁹ Lucy fought unionization at every turn, refusing to work with organized musicians whenever possible. He was particularly hostile to the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), who ultimately cost him a fortune in royalties when the courts upheld their right to collect royalties for music broadcast on the radio. See his denunciation of them in an undated office memo, probably from 1939. Memorandum from CTL, [1939], UVA: WRVA Radio. Even before the Red Scare of the post-war period, he used the charge of communism as a weapon. In 1941, for example, when employee Warde Adams petitioned Lucy for a raise, claiming to be paid considerably less than his colleagues for comparable work, Lucy replied, “I therefore feel you have the wrong slant on this, and what concerns me, of course, is this is the same slant that labor organizations take in their approach to every wage problem. I sincerely hope you are not contracting this philosophy.” Adams did not get the raise. CTL to Warde Adams, 1941, VCU: Lucy Papers.

William T. Reed was one of Harry Byrd's closest friends, and a trusted political ally. Reed chaired a number of committees for Byrd when he was the governor of Virginia, and managed his presidential campaign in 1932 when Byrd ran for the Democratic nomination against Franklin Roosevelt. Reed worked hard to further Byrd's career, and was one of the godfathers of the Byrd Machine. As WRVA's station manager, Lucy met Byrd a number of times, usually when the politician was addressing his constituents via WRVA's microphones.⁵⁰ After Reed died in 1935, Lucy began corresponding with Byrd himself, frequently referencing their shared "friend" Billy Reed. Lucy sent congratulatory telegrams, birthday cards, and keep-up-the-good-work letters. Byrd wrote back replies that must have gratified Lucy despite their brevity, because Lucy kept writing.⁵¹

Calvin Lucy moved around the periphery of Virginia's political nucleus in the 1920s and 1930s. He was loyal to his employers, and he subscribed to the complex set of class- and race-based assumptions that were the bedrock of the caste system known as the "Virginia Way." Lucy intentionally cultivated relationships with men of standing, aligning himself with the interests of the white elite. As the station manager for WRVA, the "Voice of Virginia," Lucy was a white-collared manager like many others, but he was also the portal to power. By the mid-1930s, radio was an acknowledged instrument of political and social

⁵⁰ Virginians – including politicians – came to rely on WRVA for access to Byrd's speeches and exhortations. In October 1936, Virginia House of Delegates member W.A. Harris (representing Spotsylvania and Fredericksburg) wrote, "I have just tried to hear Senator Byrd and had to turn him off: There is interference all around: Isn't there something you can do about it? Your station is perfectly useless to us here this time of the evening." Harris to WRVA, Oct. 13, 1936, VCU: Lucy Papers.

⁵¹ In one of their last exchanges, Byrd wrote, "Whenever I think of Billy Reed I think of you, and this is very often. I have a portrait of Billy in my study at Berryville and look at it frequently. He was one of the greatest men I ever knew." HFB to CTL, July 17, 1961, VCU: Lucy Papers.

influence, and Calvin Lucy was its gatekeeper in Virginia. His admiration of and deference to William Reed and Harry Byrd were part of the plan, but the potential for a patriarch to need to court a one-time clerk was not. The “Voice of Virginia,” even though it was created and run by white men at the very heart of Harry Byrd’s Virginia, could not be contained by the “Virginia Way.” Radio was too big, even for Harry Byrd’s machine.

The “Voice of Virginia” allegedly existed for “the city’s [Richmond’s] sake,” but the medium of radio did not. WRVA was part of a growing industry that, from its earliest experiments, had national aspirations. Historian Susan Smulyan argues that “the concept of national radio service existed before the economic and technological arrangements were available” to make it a reality.⁵² From amateur enthusiasts dabbling with “long-distance listening” to enterprising transmitters linking up their stations for a presidential address, Americans were thrilled by the possibility of collapsing time and space with the new technology. A large part of the reason Larus and Brother wanted to build a radio station in 1925 was so the company could add the Larus brands to the national noise. With its connections to the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), and especially following its acquisition of a 50,000-watt transmitter, the “Voice of Virginia” became increasingly integrated into a national conversation during the 1930s.

The possibility of a national radio service captivated many businessmen in 1920s America. AT&T quickly provided the technology to make it happen (for a price, of course), and by 1923 a system of telephone wires permanently

⁵² Smulyan, *Selling Radio*, 37.

connected radio stations on the East Coast between Washington, D.C., and New York.⁵³ By 1927, a precedent of “chain broadcasting” was well-established, in which locally owned radio stations received programming from a central organization like a locally owned general store might receive canned meat from Chicago’s stockyards. The station could thus broadcast both local programming as well as programming sent out to multiple stations from New York. The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) had gone live in late 1926, and was the first “wired network” – or just “network” for short – to become profitable.⁵⁴ WRVA joined NBC a year later, and broadcast its first NBC program, *The Maxwell House Coffee Time*, on November 10, 1927.⁵⁵ With that, WRVA launched itself into the world of national broadcasting.

National network shows proved popular on WRVA, just as they had elsewhere. *Amos ‘n’ Andy* was a particular sensation in Richmond, where many residents felt kinship with the actors and the characters. Freeman Gosden, the white man who played the voice of Amos, was “a Richmond boy,” in the words of station employee Bertha Hewlett.⁵⁶ When Gosden and his partner Correll came to Richmond in 1933 to broadcast *Amos ‘n’ Andy* live from WRVA across the chain, fans shut down traffic in Shockoe Bottom between Larus and Brother’s

⁵³ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 62-63.

⁵⁵ The program was better known as *The Burns and Allen Show*. “WRVA Milestones,” LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁵⁶ In point of fact, he grew up very close to where Kathleen Baseler lived as a small child. Mel Ely suggests that Gosden’s proximity to Jackson Ward, Richmond’s largest black neighborhood, familiarized him with black life that he would later act out/parody. CD-554: “Bertha Hewlett Interview, unknown interviewer, [1975],” LVA: WRVA Radio. See also Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos ‘n’ Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 15.

plant and the studio, hoping to get a glimpse of the actors.⁵⁷ Blackface was nothing new on WRVA; the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* had used it for years before WRVA joined NBC. But listeners seemed to enjoy being part of a national phenomenon; the program's importance in Richmond was amplified by its unprecedented national popularity. The *Richmond News Leader* reported in 1931 that every man in the Commonwealth Club – Richmond's most elite club for white men – fell silent at 7PM each evening as *Amos 'n' Andy* was broadcast straight into the dining room. "Instead of removing the plates, the waiters [all black men in pressed white jackets] silently drew back and stood in a line against the wall...Every man in the room breathed contentedly and settled back for fifteen minutes of undiluted entertainment."⁵⁸ It is hard to imagine that any other entertainment program ever interrupted the Commonwealth Club diners. It is even harder to imagine many other instances in which wealthy white men and black servers paused to share a moment of comedy.

Being a part of a network like NBC meant that WRVA would always be a national voice as well as a regional one. But the national voice brought with it much more than blackface and variety shows. Franklin D. Roosevelt transformed national politics with his use of radio, first during the 1932 campaign and then with his "fireside chats." Roosevelt was a radio star, and most

⁵⁷ The owner of the brand-new Byrd Theatre on Cary Street had brought Gosden and Correll for a special personal appearance, and they agreed to broadcast a network program at WRVA studios on Feb. 24, 1933. Lucy wrote that "they had been welcomed to Richmond that morning at Broad Street station by a tumultuous throng and received royal treatment in Amos' home town which he had not visited for several years." CTL's "History of WRVA," LVA: WRVA Radio. See also CD-554: "Bertha Hewlett Interview, unknown interviewer, [1975]," LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁵⁸ Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy*, 115. Ely is citing the *Richmond News Leader* of Feb. 27, 1931. It is not entirely clear from the newspaper vignette whether the black servers were actively listening to and/or enjoying the program, though Ely suggests that they probably were.

contemporary observers were convinced that, for better or worse, radio was reshaping American politics. The progressive *Christian Century*, for example, hoped that radio would mitigate the effects of mob mentality: "Even a highly intelligent man will often be seduced into the utterance of the most banal trash and deluded into the belief that he has really said something, by the stupefying effect of a cheering crowd."⁵⁹ The *New York Times* warned, however, that radio could become an instrument of political manipulation powerful enough to circumvent Constitutional checks and balances, especially when the president used it to bully Congress.⁶⁰ Roosevelt argued that radio strengthened democracy with its tendency "to restore direct contact between the masses and their leaders."⁶¹ When WRVA began applying for the 50,000-watt license in the mid-1930s, commentators were fiercely debating the degree to which radio affected democracy. That the debate revolved around *degrees* underscored the emerging consensus that radio was a viable and powerful political instrument.

Politicians arrived at this conclusion even before the pundits. As early as the 1924 election, *The Saturday Evening Post* claimed that "already politicians are sensing the difference in radio campaigning," transforming their stump speeches from rallying cries to the party faithful into broad "sales talk[s]"

⁵⁹ "Radio and the New Oratory," *The Christian Century* 49, no. 48 (Nov. 30, 1932): 1461.

⁶⁰ "Incidentally," wrote the *Times*, "the President's use of the radio for this purpose is a fresh demonstration of the wonderful power of appeal to the people which science has placed in his hands...His use of this new instrument of political discussion is a plain hint to Congress of a recourse which the President may employ if it proves necessary to rally support for legislation which he asks and which the lawmakers might be reluctant to give him." "Banking Normal Again," *New York Times*, March 14, 1933, 14. Courting public opinion was not unconstitutional, of course, but it did seem to be shifting legislative checks and balances in favor of the executive radio star.

⁶¹ As cited by Betty Houchin Winfield, *FDR and the News Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 104.

calculated to have bipartisan appeal.⁶² Historian Douglas Craig has argued that radio not only amplified exposure of individual politicians, but also consolidated the power of established politicians and institutions at the expense of anyone who was not already part of the club. Radio coverage of presidential campaigns, for example, assured the dominance of the Republican and Democratic parties. Just two decades earlier, third parties had been a common and influential part of the political landscape, but not so after 1928. Incumbents enjoyed the increased exposure radio could offer them. Even if the coverage was not flattering to the incumbent, it was difficult for a single voice of opposition to rise above the noise to mount an electoral challenge. Craig concludes his book *Fireside Politics* with the persuasive argument that instead of expanding political discourse or fostering increased political participation, radio actually reinforced the power of those who already had it.⁶³

In 1930s Virginia, Calvin Lucy was supposed to be the one seeking the patronage of the elite; the established hierarchy of Virginia's political culture was clear on this point. But politicians began doing some of the seeking as radio's cultural and political power became clearer. The Democratic empire in Virginia was based on acts of patronage that benefited many white Virginians, but solidified the power of only a chosen few. Radio could upset the equation of paternalism, or it could balance it, and in Virginia it did the former before the latter. WRVA was probably a significant factor in Harry Byrd's meteoric rise in

⁶² James H. Collins, "Giving Folks What They Want by Radio," *The Saturday Evening Post* (17 May 1924), 10-11, 102. Quotations from page 11.

⁶³ Douglas B. Craig, *Fireside Politics: Radio and Political Culture in America, 1920-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

national politics. It would not be until the early 1950s that state politicians had regular relationships with WRVA, but the 1930s saw the development of a mutually advantageous relationship between the station and Senator Harry Byrd that came to fruition with the station's successful acquisition of a 50,000-watt license.⁶⁴ WRVA had arguably always been a politicized institution, but it became a widely acknowledged political institution during the mid-1930s.

WRVA's pursuit of a 50,000-watt broadcasting license was much more than a commercial venture. Should the station acquire the license, it would become one of the most powerful radio stations in the country – not only in signal strength but in political weight. Clear channel, 50,000-watt licenses were the holy grail for radio stations, and when Calvin Lucy launched the campaign for it, he must have felt like he had just set out on an epic quest. His eventual success took WRVA – and his own career – into a new level of the stratosphere.

When WRVA first went on the air in 1925, the idea of transmitting at 50,000 watts was not much more than a dream.⁶⁵ But radio's unbridled growth soon resulted in crowded airwaves and poor reception all around. The Radio Act of 1927 was supposed to help clean up the confusion, but it was not until the Communications Act of 1934 that the government had the power to determine not only who had the privilege of broadcasting, but also the amount of power they

⁶⁴ By the 1950s, correspondence traveled back and forth between station and representatives' offices frequently, and WRVA kept updated files on many city and state politicians, in addition to Harry Byrd and Carter Glass. Also by the early 1950s, WRVA's pattern of covering the Democratic candidates largely at the exclusion of everyone else had become well entrenched. Nowhere is this more apparent than in their treatment of statewide gubernatorial elections where the station kept detailed files on Democratic primaries and none on Republican primaries. See subject files of LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁶⁵ WRVA was very proud of its 1,000 watts when it went live for the first time. I do not believe there were any stations anywhere nearby that were more powerful.

could use to push their sound through the air.⁶⁶ Radio stations had to seek approval from the newly created Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to broadcast at high wattages, which were immensely desirable because they increased the size of the listening area and attendant revenue. Most stations broadcast somewhere between 1,000 and 5,000 watts, but a lucky few would get licenses to transmit at 50,000 watts day or night, making them “king” of the air. Calvin Lucy wanted one of those.

Lucy later drafted a history of his pursuit of 50,000 watts – an unpublished history that reflected Lucy’s personal experience in the quest as much as WRVA’s. He began by touting WRVA’s ability to reach faraway places like New Zealand and Australia, evidence that implied the station was already powerful operating at 5,000 watts. He also made much of the station’s ideals of civic service, which he claimed had directed WRVA’s actions for more than ten years. But after the usual compliments had been paid, the history adopted a tone of perseverance rather than celebration, in which bureaucracy paid no attention to merit. Lucy wrote, “for several years WRVA has been trying to evolve some satisfactory plan by which Virginia could be represented in the realm of radio with a 50,000 watt station.”⁶⁷ Beginning in 1930, WRVA launched an intermittent campaign of paperwork, engineering, and petitioning before the FCC finally granted WRVA’s request on May 13, 1938, which ensured “a continuance of the

⁶⁶ For an excellent history of the complexity of the Communications Act of 1934 and its immediate consequences, please see McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy*. See also Smulyan, *Selling Radio*.

⁶⁷ CTL, “History” [of the FCC application], VCU: Lucy Papers. WRVA first applied for a 50,000-watt license that would have gone into effect in 1930. *Annual Report of the Federal Radio Commission to the Congress of the United States for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1929*, “Report of the Federal Radio Commission, Outstanding Broadcast Station Authorizations, November 9, 1929,” 101.

policy that has earned such unstinted praise and support from innumerable individuals as well as city, state, and national interests.”⁶⁸

The achievement had required significant politicking. Lucy and his colleagues had visited Washington, D.C. several times between 1935 and 1938, attending hearings held before the FCC. In its first attempt for the license, WRVA was passed over in favor of stations in Cincinnati and Philadelphia.⁶⁹ It must have been a bitter reminder that politicians as well as businessmen continued to view the South as a secondary center of commerce and innovation. Undeterred, and most likely still heavily pressured from above, Calvin Lucy and his team returned to Richmond and forged a new strategy. First, they were going to change their directional antenna to allay any fears about WRVA's interference with other clear channel stations, which had been a sticking point in the first round of hearings.⁷⁰ They were also going to pull out a bigger gun: the politicians.

I have no direct evidence of machine politicians championing WRVA's application at the FCC in the mid-1930s, but they had not hesitated to do so ten years earlier. Unaware of new federal licensing procedures, WRVA found itself in a pickle in mid-1925 just as it was preparing to go on the air for the first time. The chief of the Radio Inspection Service at the time, whose office was in the Department of Commerce, told WRVA they had to quit broadcasting because “You can only get so many apples in a barrel and there is simply no more room

⁶⁸ CTL, “History” [of the FCC application], VCU: Lucy Papers. See also “WRVA: *The Edgeworth Radio Station, Richmond, Virginia: 50,000 Watts 1939*” [pamphlet], VCU: Lucy Papers.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Interference with WPG of Atlantic City seemed to be a particular concern.

for you in Richmond.” “I was flabbergasted,” Lucy wrote, “but not Mr. Wm T. Reed.” According to Lucy, Reed called up his friend U.S. Senator Claude Swanson, who called up Herbert Hoover who was then the Secretary of Commerce. Swanson appealed for “justice for Virginia,” and WRVA ultimately received permission to continue broadcasting in time for their November 1925 debut.⁷¹

The successful application for the license coincided with a heated debate in Washington over the fairness of “superpower” radio stations, and the legitimacy of the FCC itself. A large coalition of politicians, small radio station owners, and consumer activists accused high-powered clear channel stations of having a virtual monopoly over broadcasting, and thereby limiting democratic free speech.⁷² Matters came to a head in 1937-1938, when the Roosevelt Administration and Congress both expressed skepticism in the FCC’s ability to fairly regulate high-wattage clear channel stations. Democratic Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana argued in the summer of 1938 that 50,000-watt stations

⁷¹ CTL History [personal], LVA: WRVA Radio. In late 1928 or early 1929, the Federal Radio Commission intervened to protect WRVA from local competition. NBC president Merlin Aylesworth testified before a House committee that FRC commissioner Judge Ira Robinson had been instrumental in “reliev[ing] a very bad situation, where the University of Virginia desired its own station at Charlottesville and where a big tobacco company at Richmond already had a station, and there are not enough wave lengths to go around.” The resolution was that the University of Virginia abandoned its request for a wavelength of its own, and instead transmitted directly over WRVA’s airwaves via a wire connection. This incident set a pattern where the FRC, and later the FCC, would protect WRVA’s position as a large commercial station at the expense of smaller, would-be powerful stations in the area. Federal Radio Commission, *Hearings before the Committee on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries*, HR 15430, 70th Cong., 2nd sess., 1929. See page 617.

⁷² “Superpower” generally referred to a station broadcasting at or greater than 50,000 watts. Cincinnati station WLW had been granted an experimental 500,000-watt license in 1932, and its subsequent domination of the airwaves concerned many observers. For a detailed history of station WLW’s broadcasting license and the controversy that it provoked, please see James C. Foust, *Big Voices of the Air: The Battle over Clear Channel Radio* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 2000).

“would tend to concentrate political, social and economic power and influence in the hands of a very small group,” and would have “adverse and injurious economic effects on other stations operating with less power” who were trying to service “social, religious, education, civic and other like organizations and institutions.”⁷³ In defense, the clear channel stations put together a strong enough lobby in 1938-1939 that they were able to preserve the FCC’s existing policy of distributing 32 licenses for 50,000-watt stations on a case-by-case basis.⁷⁴ The debate came to a climax at almost the exact same moment that WRVA’s application was undergoing review.

Given the scarcity and value of 50,000-watt licenses, and the fraught political climate of 1938-1939, it stands to reason that WRVA and Larus and Brother would want to call in all the support they could find. Certainly, many machine politicians shared in the glory when the license was granted, which suggests a certain quid-pro-quo. At any rate, after years of hearings and engineering tests, the FCC Examiner made “a favorable report” about WRVA’s application to the Commission in 1938. Four months later, the Commission “concurred in the judgment of its examiner and officially handed down its decision,” which was to permit WRVA to broadcast at 50,000 watts.⁷⁵ The decision made it possible for WRVA to become one of the three dozen most powerful radio stations in the U.S., and arguably the most powerful in the South.

When the FCC finally gave WRVA the go-ahead on May 13, 1938, they hit the ground running. WRVA had anticipated a positive outcome, and had already

⁷³ Senate Res. 294, June 9, 1938, *Congressional Record*, 75th Cong., 3d. Sess., 8585.

⁷⁴ Foust, *Big Voices of the Air*, 64-71.

⁷⁵ CTL, “History” [of the FCC application], VCU: Lucy Papers.

gathered the expertise and resources necessary to construct a 50,000-watt transmitter as soon as they got the authorization. They broke ground in September, and were conducting equipment tests by January 1939. On January 25, WRVA began dress rehearsal broadcasts, and on March 17, 1939, WRVA began officially broadcasting at 50,000 watts with a dedication that lasted for seven hours.⁷⁶ Local newspapers eagerly anticipated the upgrade, and everyone from housewives to governors to U.S. senators hailed its arrival as a boon for all of Virginia.⁷⁷

As general manager of a 50,000-watt radio station, Calvin Lucy received congratulations and well wishes from all over the country. Supporters and competitors alike contacted him to express their admiration for the achievement. It must have been a sweet moment for the son of a tailor; after all those years of seeking patronage, Lucy was being courted as a patron. He took great pride in his station's new status, and carefully preserved the notes and telegrams that marked the occasion. His files contain letters from his local competitors at station WRNL, owned by one Richmond newspaper, as well as hearty encouragement from the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. Alfred Strick, director of the Glee Club at Farmville State Teachers' College that occasionally performed for WRVA, expressed his admiration for the accomplishment. As did H.G. Redding, the Superintendent of Western Union Telegraph Company, whose company

⁷⁶ "WRVA Milestones," LVA: WRVA Radio. "WRVA: The Edgeworth Radio Station, Richmond Virginia, 1939," LVA: WRVA Radio. "50,000W Dedication, March 17, 1939," VCU: Lucy Papers.

⁷⁷ The inaugural 50,000-watt broadcast included (but was not limited to): U.S. Reps. Colgate Darden and Clifton Woodrum, Speaker of Virginia's House of Delegates Ashton Dovell, and the mayors of Newport News, Fredericksburg, and Petersburg. Last but not least, "words of commendation" from sitting Virginia Governor James Price, and then U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd for dessert. CTL History [personal], LVA: WRVA Radio.

undoubtedly made a tidy sum off WRVA.⁷⁸ Local businessmen, politicians, and educators were well pleased with WRVA's good fortune because it increased their own prospects of regional or national sales, and connected Richmond and Virginia closer to the national marketplace and a much larger audience.

Approximately half the congratulatory notes were from men and women whose business was connected to radio in some way, but many other letters were signed simply "Clarence and Elizabeth Avery," "Mr. and Mrs. A.J. Bland" of Ohio, or "Betty and Jimmie," who most likely had no commercial interest in WRVA's new high-power station, but were delighted by the increased quality of reception.⁷⁹ The new directional antenna, operating at such high wattage, meant that people to the west and southwest of Richmond, as well as in the Tidewater area, could now tune in to a network-affiliated radio station that was on the air twenty-four hours a day. For many people living in the rural areas of the Upper South, this was a new – or at least improved – door into the world of mass culture that provided a common ground for many Americans in the 1930s. For the first time in the nation's history, people of disparate backgrounds and locations heard the same message at the same time, whether a joke, one of Roosevelt's fireside speeches, or a musical program.

⁷⁸ H.G. Redding to WRVA, March 17, 1939, VCU: Lucy Papers. Notes also came from Thalhimer Bros., Inc., who owned one of the largest department stores in Richmond, the business manager for Staunton and Augusta County Chamber of Commerce, and editor of the *Virginia Federation of Women's Clubs Magazine*. It is interesting that a professional woman sent in her congratulations with everyone's else's, because it could be a clever strategy to claim the same degree of legitimacy as other Virginia businesses. There is some evidence to suggest Lucy was somewhat uncomfortable with her note, because when he replied he referred to her as "Mrs. Charles G. Mugler, Jr.," rather than as "Helen Smith Mugler," which is how she had signed the original letter.

⁷⁹ All congratulatory telegrams, including many with unclear authors, can be found in VCU: Lucy Papers, box 3, folder 6.

WRVA offered something to its new listeners, however, that the other high-wattage stations from the industrial belt and the Northeast did not. In addition to the network shows, WRVA ran programs that catered to the interests, tastes, and concerns of rural and/or southern folk. The daily weather report and market prices for farmers, the hillbilly variety shows, and the gospel hour were wildly popular in the region that WRVA served, and were not widely available in hilly regions where weaker signals from local stations did not go far. Many of these new listeners wrote to Lucy congratulating and thanking him for the innovation. And at least one listener wanted a share of the glory, "Program coming in fine, dedicate number to we mountaineers."⁸⁰

Lucy considered the acquisition of the 50,000-watt license to be a highlight of his career. Larus and Brother Company was happy, listeners were happy, his peers throughout the National Association of Broadcasters were happy. But perhaps most importantly of all, Senator Byrd was happy. Calvin Lucy sent a letter to Senator Byrd a couple of weeks before the official dedication of the 50,000-watt transmitter, soliciting his participation in the dedication program. "We trust the many demands being made upon your time may not prevent our being honored with your participation in observance of the most important event in the history of this station," Lucy wrote.⁸¹ On the surface, the letter looks like a courtesy. Byrd had been a part of WRVA's opening night in 1925, so it made

⁸⁰ Maurice Howard to WRVA, March 17, 1939, VCU: Lucy Papers.

⁸¹ CTL to HFB, March 4, 1939, VCU: Lucy Papers.

sense to include him in this next great milestone. No fool, Byrd immediately accepted the invitation and asked for some talking points.⁸²

Byrd had good reason to take a renewed interest in WRVA, and in its station manager. About the same time that the FCC approved WRVA's application, the Richmond Chamber of Commerce circulated a memo describing WRVA as a "Virginia institution" that "[had] become the radio voice of the seat of government" in Richmond.⁸³ Between its powerful broadcasting signal and its extensive on-location coverage at the State Capitol, this was not an overstatement. But with a new directional antenna blasting WRVA into the rest of the United States with 50,000 watts of power behind it, the "Voice of Virginia" had the potential to connect an ambitious politician like Byrd to an audience that extended far beyond his own constituency.

Listener surveys of the late 1930s indicated that WRVA had increased its audience exponentially with the new transmitter. The station received mail from "140 different points" in Virginia, as well as from thirty-four states and Canada in the days after the inaugural 50,000-watt broadcast.⁸⁴ The station's Hooper ratings went through the roof after the transition, and by 1948 WRVA claimed to have the "highest average rating of any radio station in the U.S.," meaning WRVA captured the largest percentage of its available audience of any radio station in the country. Hooper Ratings demonstrated that WRVA was particularly

⁸² HFB to WRB, Feb. 28, 1939; March 6, 1939, VCU: Lucy Papers.

⁸³ "WRVA: A Virginia Enterprise" [ca. 1939], VCU: Lucy Papers.

⁸⁴ Most of the remaining states were on the other side of the radio-wave killing Rocky Mountains, so their silence was to be expected anyway. Listeners from California were the only ones west of the Rockies to write WRVA after its 50,000-watt dedication. "Geographical Response to Dedication Program," CTL to Barron Howard, March 30, 1939, VCU: Lucy Papers.

strong in the evenings, when it could boast a 46.9 percent share of its audience, better than any continuously monitored station in the country.⁸⁵ No other instrument, or station, could provide such an efficient, inexpensive, and effective conduit between the person at the microphone and the people of the mid-Atlantic. Harry Byrd, and legions of other powerful or would-be powerful people, were deeply interested in the political benefits that radio could provide them. Calvin T. Lucy gladly used his radio station in service of the interests of Virginia's white elite, and WRVA was, in some senses, another example of the hegemonic power of Jim Crow Virginia.

Despite Lucy's loyalty to Virginia's brand of paternalism and patriarchy, the tailor's son from Baltimore undercut its very foundation with his success. When WRVA became a 50,000-watt station, Lucy became a very important man both in Virginia and in the national radio community. In 1953, after more than four decades of service to the company, Lucy was promoted to the position of "Vice-President in Charge of Radio-Television" for Larus and Brother Company.⁸⁶ The twenty-one-year-old man who had come to Richmond and introduced the typewriter to Larus's accounting division in 1912 had worked his way through the ranks, making the right kinds of decisions and friends, and had finally obtained an executive position at the age of sixty-one. After his promotion, Lucy continued to work doggedly, particularly with regard to Larus and Brother Company's new

⁸⁵ In 1934, C.F. Hooper pioneered a "co-incidental" technique of conducting listener surveys that soon became the most highly esteemed method in the trade. Surveyors would telephone households during broadcasts to ask "what are you listening to?" Smulyan, *Selling Radio*, 122. "Advertisement – 'Thank You, Richmond for the highest average rating of any radio station in the U.S.' 1948," LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁸⁶ WRVA Press Release, Sept. 21, 1953, LVA: WRVA Radio.

future in television, but his career sat comfortably on a plateau until his retirement in 1961. The promotion was probably more a gesture of gratitude for things accomplished than a request for grand projects in the future, and Lucy spent the final years of his official career strengthening the connections he had made with other industry men and women at national conferences and through organizations like "Radio Pioneers."⁸⁷ Lucy had risen to the top, and he sat there contentedly for the rest of his working life.

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When it became public knowledge that "Virginia's grand old man of broadcasting will retire October 1, 1961 after devoting a life-time to the promotion of his great love – radio and television," dozens of people and organizations wrote to applaud and thank Calvin Lucy for his achievements.⁸⁸ He had been the station's general manager from its inauguration in 1925 until 1956 when he relinquished the position to become a Larus and Brother Company executive.⁸⁹ C.T. Lucy had started as a sales clerk and become one of the most powerful men in state.

In the years after Lucy's retirement, he often looked back on his accomplishments with a well-deserved feeling of pride. Lucy had become a vice-president of one of Richmond's largest tobacco companies by the end of his forty-year career, and had created an institution that would thrive long after he

⁸⁷ In 1954-1955, Lucy was director of Quality Radio Stations, Inc. Also in the mid-1950s, he was involved with the Radio Pioneers (NY), contributing to a large oral and written history of radio that was being compiled by Ward Quaal. Ibid.

⁸⁸ "Virginia Radio Pioneer to Retire; C.T. Lucy Guide Destiny [sic] of WRVA," *The Henrico Herald* (Henrico County, Virginia), August 10, 1961, 4. See also "Virginia's Ace of Broadcasting Plans Retirement October 1," *The Caroline Progress*, August 17, 1961, 15.

⁸⁹ CTL, "Biographical Information," June 18, 1960, LVA: WRVA Radio.

had gone. Where there had been silence, he had peopled Virginia's airwaves with voices, and eventually faces. He had been a founder in the movement to develop mass communications in Virginia and the United States, and he could claim success to that end. In 1973, the Virginia Association of Broadcasters, of which he had been a founding member, honored Lucy with a one-time award as "Virginia's First Broadcaster." In addition to being "instrumental in shaping this new and growing force [of communications], first as struggling radio and later as budding television," Lucy was honored for "the wisdom, energy, perseverance [sic], tough-mindedness, and good will he brought to the broadcasting industry at a time when these characteristics were most important – the formative years when patterns were being established."⁹⁰ The award took an aging Lucy by surprise, and he wrote to his friend Rod Collins, the Director of Radio Television Center in Charlottesville, "I am still more or less flabbergasted and can never thank everybody enough for the exciting and wonderful experience, when I thought I was simply among the relics of a bygone era."⁹¹

Pippa Holloway demonstrates forcefully that hegemonic forces in Harry Byrd's Virginia bound most middle-class white men to the interests of the white elite. This was certainly true in Lucy's case. His expectations as a white, middle-class man all reinforced his commitment to the status quo. It is not surprising that Lucy adopted his boss's politics, or opposed organized labor, or threw his personal support behind the proponents of segregation in the 1950s and 1960s. But in attaching himself to Virginia's white elite, Calvin Lucy was destroying it.

⁹⁰ Virginia Association of Broadcasters, *Special Information Bulletin* 10, no. 2 (February 1973), VCU: Lucy Papers.

⁹¹ to Rod Collins, n. d., VCU: Lucy Papers.

Both Lucy and WRVA glorified tradition and old ways during their first decades of broadcasting, all of which reinforced rather than revised principles of paternalism. Programs like the *Four Deuces* and the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* plucked the mystic chords of memory that united many white Virginians in reification of Lost Cause ideologies. Even when WRVA built the 50,000-watt transmitter in Eastern Henrico – a technological marvel in the mid-1930s – Lucy intentionally drew connections between the new tower and Virginia’s past by describing its position on top of (to hear him tell it) five or six different battlefields.⁹² Even the cutting edge of technology needed to be carefully contained within a very particular form of tradition. Lucy had deeply conservative sensibilities, and he was replicating the dominant norms of his race, class, and gender.

Radio, however, gave Lucy a vehicle to leverage himself from the Baltimore sewing machine business into an executive office at Larus and Brother. Even though both Lucy and WRVA often acted as agents in the perpetuation of class-based prescriptions, Lucy’s very career demonstrated new patterns of power and opportunity for non-elite men in early-twentieth-century Virginia. The “old boys’ network” that held together the white elite was slowly giving way to a new world where ambitious men – and even a few women – could wedge themselves into positions of professional importance. Lucy worked

⁹² In his history of WRVA, Lucy barely pauses for breath after describing the FCC’s 1938 tentative approval of the clear channel application before situating the tower squarely in the Civil War. “We were not only near Deep Bottom of Civil War fame, with the original Federal breastworks running across our property, but adjoining was Varina Farm of Colonial fame. We were indeed in historic country...in the general area are Fort Brady, Fort Harrison, Fort Gilmer, and Drewery’s [sic] Bluff and Bermuda Hundred all of which figured prominently in the Union campaign to capture Richmond.” CTL, WRVA History [personal], LVA: WRVA Radio.

hard to achieve his position of security and respect, far surpassing anything his father had accomplished. But in doing so, he (and WRVA's 50,000 watts) demonstrated how fragile an oligarchy built on personal connections and tradition could be in a modern age of innovation and mass culture.

Chapter 3

“I Wouldn’t Take Anything for My Career”: Bertha Hewlett as a Founding Father

Two days before her twenty-second birthday in 1925, Bertha Hewlett began work as the “first hostess” of Edgeworth Tobacco Company’s fledgling radio station, WRVA, in Richmond, Virginia. She had no experience in radio, or indeed any work experience at all, but her church choir director Elmer Hoelzle brought her along with him when he was hired as a Studio Director.¹ Hoelzle needed an accompanist for the musical acts he planned to recruit, and WRVA needed a white woman to make the establishment respectable. She was available for work immediately, and so she began a career in radio that would last almost a half century.

A Richmond native, Hewlett had attended John Marshall High School in downtown Richmond, followed by Richmond Woman’s College, which later became part of the University of Richmond.² The efficient and energetic young woman brought her organizational and musical talents to the new station, as well as a touch of femininity. Radio was a new technology, and it reached directly into people’s living rooms. In order to make the new technology palatable to an excited but anxious public, Edgeworth officials needed a women like Hewlett as its “face.” She was white, well-educated, church-going, and not too independent for the tastes of WRVA’s conservative management. She still lived with her

¹ “It’s the only place I ever worked,” Hewlett recalled of WRVA 68 years later. “I never had a job interview.” Linda Livengood, “89-Year-Old Veteran of Live Radio Still Contributes Her Expertise,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Feb. 1, 1993, C2.

² Radio Promotion Department memorandum, June 17, 1960, LVA, WRVA Radio.

parents, after all, so was unlikely to be too much of a “New Woman.”³ Virginians were still reeling from the shock of the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote, which the Virginia General Assembly had called “unwarranted, unnecessary, undemocratic, and dangerous interference with the rights reserved to the states.”⁴ With her fresh-faced youth, white gloves, and courteous manners, Hewlett seemed to embody traditional ideals of white southern womanhood, and she lent the operation an air of respectability. They hired her on Hoelzle’s recommendation, and paid her no more than \$40 a month.⁵ Despite the small salary, Hewlett was proud to be “First hostess of WRVA.”⁶

³ The term “New Woman” could refer to any young woman who attended college, was politically active, played sports, pursued a career, and/or wore modern fashion in the 1920s. Historian Nancy MacLean has argued persuasively that southern white men derived power from white women’s alleged dependency upon them for protection and provision. Without that dependency, the justifications for complicated systems of race- and gender-based discrimination were threatened, making the independent “New Woman” a threatening icon. MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*.

⁴ Having been ratified by three-quarters of all states, the Amendment nevertheless applied to Virginia women and they could vote in 1920 for the first time. Virginia did not officially ratify the Nineteenth Amendment until 1952. Heinemann, et al, *Old Dominion, New Commonwealth*, 296. For an excellent essay on the uphill battle women faced in the quest for suffrage, as well as the ways in which debates over race were at the center of the struggle, please see Suzanne Lebsock, “Women Suffrage and White Supremacy: A Virginia Case Study,” in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, edited by Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 62-100. For a regional study of the intersection of suffrage activism and race, please see Elna C. Green, *Southern Strategies: Southern Women and the Woman Suffrage Question* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁵ Some evidence suggests Hewlett worked for free during the station’s crucial first months of operation. See CTL, “The Voice of Virginia,” 1966, LVA: WRVA Radio. The first records of Hewlett’s salary are from 1927, when she made \$40 a month, the lowest amount of money any station employee made, including the poorly-paid black porters. In any given year from 1927-1937 (the only years for which data is available), white male WRVA employees made about twice as much Hewlett, and often much more. CTL, personal notes on WRVA Radio Staff, LVA: Lucy Family Papers.

⁶ Radio Promotion Department memorandum, June 17, 1960, LVA: WRVA Radio. Small wages were a fact of life for working women of all colors in the 1920s. An article in a 1930 issue of *The Survey* acknowledged the discrepancy in compensation for men and women and asked “Are the inherent satisfactions of the work itself more important to her than financial returns?” In Hewlett’s case, I think the answer must be “yes.” “Higher Education, Lower Wages,” *The Survey* (Dec. 15, 1930): 309.

Over the next half-century, Hewlett carved a place for herself not only in the everyday operations of an ever-more powerful radio station, but also as a highly skilled and experienced radio pioneer. Her unthreatening job description as “hostess” was misleading; under the protection of her unassuming job title, Hewlett had assumed the role of producer, performer, secretary, and receptionist, all in her first year with the station. Over the next two decades, she became so familiar with both the business and the maintenance of the station's operations that she became a manager – the only woman to do so until 1951.

Radio was a hostile business for women seeking a career in the 1920s and 1930s. Some women, such as journalist Dorothy Thompson and entertainer Gracie Allen, forged careers in radio by gaining direct access to the microphone. But the archives and the history books are mostly silent about the women who tried to forge careers away from the microphone.⁷ Hewlett was not a performer, but an office worker. And as unlikely as it was, she built a successful career in business and broadcasting in mid-century Virginia. She was a division manager for WRVA before Virginia had even ratified the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote. She built her career through a combination of hard

⁷ Scholar Donna Halper's book *Invisible Stars* is an important exception. In combing through the archives of trade journals and network manuscripts, Halper identified a handful of women who obtained powerful positions in the country's national networks during the so-called Golden Age of radio. Donna L. Halper, *Invisible Stars: A Social History of Women in American Broadcasting* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001). Historian Michele Hilmes has also dedicated much of her scholarship to an exploration of a fundamental contradiction in both historical and contemporary broadcasting: the majority of radio's and TV's audience is female, but “its ranks of writers, producers, directors, actors, executives, critics, and regulars remain predominantly and resolutely male – at least, so we are led to believe.” Hilmes points out that even when women did participate in broadcasting, scholars have assessed their work in terms of its “feminizing” qualities. That is, their work was devalued historically, and continues to be devalued. Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 131. I hope in this chapter both to explore the ways in which Hewlett and her colleagues considered her work to be “feminized,” but also the ways in which she used such an assessment as a subterfuge. I do not wish to replicate the pattern in the radio scholarship that Hilmes identifies as contributing to the obscurity of women's work rather than its illumination.

work, self-motivation, and an intuitive understanding of how to play a man's game as a woman. She made herself indispensable to the station, filling any role, assuming any assignment. "I tell you the truth there wasn't much down there that I hadn't done," she claimed in 1975.⁸ In tracing the tasks she performed for WRVA, and the trajectory of her remarkable career, we can begin to assess the ways in which one individual – in this case a white southern career woman – could subtly manipulate and exploit norms of gender and race in order to advance her position in mid-century Virginia. As in Calvin Lucy's experience, WRVA provided Hewlett with the space to simultaneously uphold expectations of a working, white woman, and subvert or revise them for her personal gain. Unlike Calvin Lucy, however, Bertha Hewlett was not readily accepted as "one of the team" simply because she was a woman. Her success in the face of institutionalized discrimination, and the methods in which she achieved it, revealed the fissures and contradictions inherent in Harry Byrd's Virginia, where social customs were predicated on hierarchical arrangements of race and gender.

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When WRVA went on the air the evening of November 2, 1925, all was chaos. The Edgeworth Tobacco Company had given Calvin Lucy – a sales clerk at the time – a year in which to hire some people to build a radio station and get voices on the air. While it took considerable ingenuity to get the radio station off the ground, the founding members of WRVA radio could not be accused of handling all the loose ends with finesse. The majority of the station employees'

⁸ Nancy Finch, "Aunt Sammy Confesses," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 3, 1975, D1, D3.

resources and energy was devoted to technical concerns the first year or so of operation. Once the hand-carved Italian Renaissance chairs and monks cloth draperies had been set in place, WRVA officials turned over the niceties of accommodating visitors and performers to Bertha Hewlett.⁹ In theory, that was the main responsibility of the “first hostess.” But Hewlett soon found that accommodating visitors and performers required much more than familiarity with middle-class southern manners and hospitality. From the very beginning, under the auspices of “hostess,” Hewlett began working her way into the business, production, and public relations sectors of WRVA’s operations.

On opening night, Hewlett got to the station early to get it ready for the inaugural broadcast, which would begin at 9:00 PM. WRVA was not just introducing itself to faceless listeners around Virginia, the station was also hosting some of the most powerful white men in the city and state. William T. Reed, the president of Edgeworth’s parent company Larus and Brother, had used his own social influence, and no doubt the deep-seated self-interest of some his acquaintances, to secure the attendance of the mayor of Richmond, and no less a man than governor-almost-elect Harry Byrd, among others.¹⁰ WRVA officials were courting the movers and shakers of local politics as much as they were courting listeners, and it was crucial that the inaugural broadcast go off without a hitch, both on the airwaves and in the studio.

⁹ “Larus Brother Radio Station to Open Tomorrow,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Nov. 1, 1925, 12.

¹⁰ Polls opened a mere seven hours after WRVA’s inaugural broadcast ended. Harry Byrd won in a landslide, to no one’s great surprise.

So when Hewlett let herself into the studio and discovered that the “furniture men” had failed to deliver the lamps that were supposed to have been installed that day, she did some quick thinking and improvised a solution:

No way could I get in touch with the furniture man, so I had to go home and get every lamp in my house and bring them down to the studio. Which I did. And they made it look a whole lot better. It didn't look like a barn then. It looked like a barn before, but it didn't look like it after. So that was a really exciting time.¹¹

Arranging furniture or lighting could certainly be considered the responsibility of the “hostess,” and indeed Hewlett believed that it was. But in fulfilling her obligations, Hewlett also demonstrated loyalty, creativity, and determination. Her policy of solving problems, often without being instructed to do so, would ultimately lead her far beyond the boundaries of “hostessing.” And in the meantime, her initiative on opening night no doubt endeared her to her superiors, who had no desire for people to think their new, expensive radio station looked like a barn. With the lighting snafu fixed, the inaugural broadcast continued without a hitch and Hewlett felt the bigwigs were suitably impressed: “they were just beaming, because it was something new, you know.”¹²

Hewlett embraced her position as “station hostess,” but she also adapted it to a corporate setting. Traditionally, a middle-class, white, southern hostess established an intimate, welcoming, and pleasant environment in her family's home. She would attend to the basic needs of her guests, all while showing her family and her family's possessions to best effect.¹³ Hewlett's job at the station

¹¹ CD-554: “Bertha Hewlett Interview, unknown interviewer, [1975],” LVA: WRVA Radio.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ideals of white southern womanhood have been studied extensively by a number of scholars, with particular emphasis on the myth-making of those ideals. In “Women and Leadership,” Julia

was similar, but provided a much broader scope for her efforts. Hewlett did, to some degree, wait on her white male employees. She took dictations from them, ran errands for them, and probably assisted in general housekeeping duties. She also welcomed guests at the front office, helped visiting performers get settled in, and responded to mail – all duties that were consistent with women’s responsibilities in the home. Hewlett was not hostessing in her home, however, but in a business setting. And her “hostessing” duties soon became something else entirely.

*

The first few years of operation, WRVA employees could all expect to perform multiple duties. There were few station employees, and the station’s needs were constantly changing and evolving. Like many women getting a foothold in early radio, Hewlett knew how to play a number of instruments and had been hired partly because she was an accomplished pianist.¹⁴ She played WRVA’s sign-off number, “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” starting with the station’s first test program on October 21, 1925. She continued to play the song for many years, sometimes with other musicians and sometimes solo.¹⁵ She also

Kirk Blackwelder points to author Margaret Mitchell and her work as reflective of expectations for white, middle-class women in the early twentieth century. Blackwelder argues that Mitchell, as well as many urban, white, middle-class women, were “caught between nostalgia for the Old South and a desire to embrace the New South.” These women “actively promot[ed] an idealized notion of the past,” emphasizing domesticity and purity, for example. At the same time, however, Mitchell and other urban, white, middle-class women had firmly embraced a consumer culture that had little to do with the plantation life that they idealized. Julia Kirk Blackwelder, “Women and Leadership: A Century of Change in the South,” in *The American South in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Craig S. Pascoe, Karen Trahan Leathem, and Andy Ambrose (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 39-55. See pp. 43-44 especially.

¹⁴ A significant number – possibly a majority – of women who made careers in early radio got their foot in the door with musical ability. Halper, *Invisible Stars*.

¹⁵ She claimed that Pulitzer-Prize-winning historian Douglas S. Freeman “wouldn’t let anyone else play [“Carry Me Back to Old Virginny”] but me. And the reason for that was he wanted it played

got accustomed to stepping into a performance at the last second because “many of them [entertainers] would come, but they said they had no accompanist. Well, don’t worry about that,” Hewlett said, “because I was there, and whenever they didn’t have an accompanist I played for them.” Less frequently, the pianist for out-of-town groups “would go stage-fright, and then I’d have to go and play for them.”¹⁶ Hewlett became comfortable performing in the studio as well as working behind a desk. Hewlett’s dexterity in the studio, as well as her efficiency in the station’s day-to-day administrative matters, resulted in increased responsibility after the first couple of years. It is notable, however, that her salary never increased more than \$10 a year, so that the discrepancy between her and her colleagues’ salary became even more pronounced over time, despite the additional responsibilities she undertook. The persistently low salary is an indication that even as station officials began to depend on Hewlett for all sorts of work – including tasks that normally male personnel would have done – they continued to assess her value as a “woman” and not simply as a “worker.”

Hewlett was half of a two-person program called *The Sunshine Hour*, which was one of WRVA’s longest-running and most popular radio programs from 1926 until the sudden death of Holland Wilkinson in 1955. Wilkinson was the star of the show, a “friendly, 233-pound giant of a man” whose name was “a

as it was written. He didn’t want all the embellishments, he didn’t want all those fancy notes put in. He wanted it *just like it was*. And that’s the way I had to play it. And I did. Anyhow.” Freeman had a regular show about the history of “Old Virginia.” CD-554: “Bertha Hewlett Interview, unknown interviewer, [1975],” LVA: WRVA Radio.

¹⁶ Ibid.

synonym for cheer and hope.”¹⁷ The “Sunshine Man,” as his fans christened him, believed himself to be an evangelistic singer with a calling to comfort and uplift the disabled, despondent, and lonely. *The Sunshine Hour* offered spiritual nourishment and companionship for loyal listeners – many of whom lived in isolation – through a combination of “old-time” Christian music and conversation. More listeners wrote to the “Sunshine Man” than to any other performer in WRVA’s lineup, and he and Bertha Hewlett read all the letters, choosing a few for Wilkinson to mention on the air.¹⁸ Each program featured platitudes and a handful of tunes, which Hewlett played on the piano while Wilkinson sang.

Hewlett received no on-air credit for her partnership with *The Sunshine Hour*. She did not greet the audience, and Wilkinson did not introduce her. And while Wilkinson did regularly refer to himself as “we” – “We sure do appreciate all of the nice letters that we have received, and we’re doing our level best to sing the songs that you want us to sing”¹⁹ – the referent was unclear. He could have been referring to the station, to Hewlett, or to his wife Martha, who was also a partner in his career. In later interviews, Hewlett would say she was “affiliated with” the *Sunshine Hour*, never trying to take more credit for the program or attach her name to Wilkinson’s.²⁰ Rather, she expressed a deep affection for Wilkinson and pride in the program’s popularity. In 1949, when asked about her involvement with the program, she deflected attention back to Wilkinson, saying

¹⁷ Jim Jenkins, “The ‘Sunshine’ Man – Holland Wilkinson,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 27, 1949): D13.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Holland R. Wilkinson, “Sunshine Man” on the “Sunshine Hour,” Dec. 29, 1939, LVA: WRVA Radio.

²⁰ See, for example, CD-554: “Bertha Hewlett Interview, unknown interviewer, [1975],” LVA: WRVA Radio.

“he can pack more good into a day than anyone she has known.”²¹ It would not be outlandish to suggest that Hewlett filled the role in the workplace that Martha filled everywhere else: as Wilkinson’s cheerleader and helpmeet.

Hewlett was a mainstay of *The Sunshine Hour* for more than two decades. A *Sunshine Hour* hymnal published in the late 1930s gave her rare credit for her partnership with the “Sunshine Man.” While “serving in the capacity of hostess,” Hewlett had endeared herself to Wilkinson with her “willing spirit and friendly attitude,” the hymnal claimed.²² Wilkinson asked her to provide his accompaniment, almost certainly without any additional pay, to which she eagerly consented. Her responsibilities to the program fell within the traditional parameters of women’s work – playing the piano, promoting Christian values, assisting a male authority figure without compensation – but in the case of the *Sunshine Hour* this work assumed higher value than similar work done elsewhere in the studio because the program had such a large audience. Not only did the program fulfill the station’s public commitment to civic uplift through spiritual enrichment, but it also attracted a wide listenership which could then be monetized in advertising revenue.²³ Without an accompanist, or a clerk to answer the thousands of letters the “Sunshine Man” received each year, the program would not have worked. Hewlett had adapted her role as “hostess” into

²¹ Jim Jenkins, “The ‘Sunshine’ Man – Holland Wilkinson,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 27, 1949, D13.

²² Walter R. Bishop, “A Biographical Sketch of Holland R. Wilkinson,” LVA: WRVA Radio.

²³ In fact, it is likely that the station made a great deal of money out of *The Sunshine Hour* over time. Because WRVA was non-commercial when Wilkinson agreed to do *The Sunshine Hour* in 1926, he accepted the job without pay. I am not certain whether he received a paycheck at some point, but in 1936 he was still doing the tri-weekly program “absolutely without pay.” Ibid.

an essential and profitable one for the station. She was rapidly becoming the station's "No. 1 Female Employee."

Hewlett's involvement with the *Sunshine Hour* established a pattern for her contributions to studio programs. Though she performed critical administrative and performance services, she rarely if ever received direct credit. Additionally, she became more and more enmeshed in the everyday functioning of the radio station, and more experienced. In 1926, when WRVA subscribed to a series of United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) radio programs entitled *Aunt Sammy*, officials chose Hewlett to perform the star role. Having proven herself in other areas of the studio, she became a feature personality for WRVA, though only station officials knew her real identity. To take on the role of *Aunt Sammy*, Bertha Hewlett had to leave her own name behind.

Hewlett played Aunt Sammy, the fictitious and helpful wife of Uncle Sam, from 1926 until the station discontinued its subscription to the program in 1931. "No one knew her identity, but her voice was a familiar source of information for Richmonders," wrote the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* in 1993.²⁴ Hewlett's performance of *Aunt Sammy* is a perfect illustration of the way she leveraged her colleagues' and the listeners' expectations of "femininity" into advancement in the world of broadcasting. Hewlett, by her own admission, knew nothing of homemaking. Her mother's housework freed Hewlett to pursue a paid career. But Hewlett was more than willing to assume the role of the helpful housewife on

²⁴ Linda Livengood, "89-Year-Old Veteran of Live Radio Still Contributes Her Expertise," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Feb. 1, 1993, C2.

the air, dispensing daily recipes even though “she didn’t do any cooking” herself.²⁵

Aunt Sammy was supposed to be frugal, dependable, and wise. She was the creation of the USDA Bureau of Home Economics in 1926, which sent prewritten scripts to dozens of radio stations across the country. According to the USDA, “the highlights of Aunt Sammy’s show were the menus and recipes, but Aunt Sammy also talked about clothing, furniture, appliances, and other family and household matters...She also commented on world affairs, reported the latest fads, and told jokes.”²⁶ “Home Economics” was a relatively new field in the 1920s and 1930s, and radio broadcasters used Home Economics “experts” to fill air time and attract a female audience.²⁷ Susan Smulyan has argued that early radio broadcasters lined up a few women “experts,” like Betty Crocker and Aunt Sammy, in order to add warmth to the listening experience, thus softening the invasion of radio into domestic spaces.²⁸ Hewlett delivered the USDA script in the “slow, soft Southern drawl of a native Richmonder,” clearly presenting herself as a “regional” Aunt Sammy, but she did not publicly reveal her role in the program until 1975.²⁹

²⁵ Nancy Finch, “Aunt Sammy Confesses,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 3, 1975, D1, D3.

²⁶ Consumer and Food Economics Institute, Agricultural Research Service, USDA, *Selections from Aunt Sammy’s Radio Recipes and USDA Favorites. Home and Garden Bulletin* 215 (August 1976): 1-24.

²⁷ According to a 1933 article in *The Journal of Home Economics*, the USDA Home Economics programs were the most widely broadcast. Home economists were eager to use radio as a teaching tool because they felt that dramatization of household advice was better than straight lecturing. The article claimed that radio gave home economists the opportunity to “demonstrate” via sound, such as the proper cracking of an egg. How one can divine the proper cracking of an egg via sound alone is beyond me. “Home Economics in Radio Programs,” *The Journal of Home Economics* 25 (October 1933): 673-679.

²⁸ Smulyan, *Selling Radio*, 89-91.

²⁹ Nancy Finch, “Aunt Sammy Confesses,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 3, 1975, D1, D3.

Hewlett was not entirely comfortable as Aunt Sammy. She recalled entering the studio, “clutching her Aunt Sammy script,” authoritatively “suggest[ing] menus for her women listeners tuning in on radios or crystal sets around Richmond” for which she had no frame of reference.³⁰ Hewlett’s performance of womanhood was complex. In one interpretation, she was a career woman playing a housewife. And in another interpretation, she was a radio “hostess” playing a housewife playing a “radio hostess.” The key to the performance was her anonymity. By subjugating her personal identity to broader constructions of womanhood – either as Hewlett or Aunt Sammy – she held onto a position in the highly masculine world of radio broadcasting. The anonymity was the price she paid for moving her way up into a broadcasting career as a woman. There was no getting around the fact that she was a woman, and therefore excluded from a traditional career path. So instead she became a generic woman, on the air and in the office, who could make herself useful to anyone at any time. In this manner, she maintained her usefulness vis-à-vis the station’s objectives without raising the threatening specter of the “New Woman” that her colleagues disdained and feared.

Despite being a critical component of the *Sunshine Hour* and the sole performer on *Aunt Sammy*, Hewlett took more pride in her involvement with the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* than anything else. Later in her life, she described herself as the “hostess and ‘cheer leader’ of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, a variety program

³⁰ Ibid. Her proud father allegedly listened to her program by attaching his crystal set to the metal bed post or radiator.

show-casing local talent, but it would be more accurate to call her a producer.³¹ She assisted in scripting the program, performed as a “broadcast personality,” frequently took part in musical acts, arranged listener membership, and facilitated business transactions.³² Not only did she “help select the talent,” but she “had to see to it that they were there and ready to go on at the right time.” Aside from being talent broker and stage manager, she also sometimes stood in as an unofficial master of ceremonies when the official MC, Pat Binford, was otherwise occupied, or perhaps when he thought she could connect with the audience better than he could. As argued in chapter one, “‘Down Where the South Begins’: Sounds of Confusion,” the fulcrum of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*’s success was its ability to make listeners feel as though they were part of a club. Binford may have occasionally called upon Hewlett to establish a rapport with the live audience because she could connect with them – and especially the female members – as a woman. Before the show started, for example, Hewlett “would go to the store and...buy up two or three dollars’ worth of candy kisses.” About fifteen minutes before the show started, she would:

throw those kisses to everybody in the audience. I did that because everybody had the idea they had to keep quiet and that would have ruined the whole effect of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* because it was the atmosphere that you had to have at the background for it. And when I’d throw those kisses, you never heard such laughter and carrying-on in your life and that’s what we needed. And so, every one of them looked forward to that every Saturday night because they never knew when I was comin’ in to do it. But they knew I was coming.³³

³¹ In 1975, Hewlett explained “it was up to us to go out and get the talent, and invite them to come back to the studio and perform.” She does not elaborate on who “us” refers to, but it is likely she was referring to Elmer Hoelzle and herself. CD-554: “Bertha Hewlett Interview, unknown interviewer, [1975],” LVA: WRVA Radio.

³² Radio Promotion Department memorandum, June 17, 1960, LVA: WRVA Radio.

³³ CD-554: “Bertha Hewlett Interview, unknown interviewer, [1975],” LVA: WRVA Radio.

Hewlett was not a well-known *Corn Cob Pipe Club* personality. The program was a predominantly male enterprise, and only one or two women made regular, credited appearances. Indeed, the available evidence suggests that the members of the actual *Corn Cob Pipe Club* clubs around the country were all men.³⁴ The live audience, however, included men and women and Binford seemed to recognize that the program's all-male cast might have trouble connecting with a mixed-gender audience without a female liaison. Hewlett was that liaison, and the performers and the live audience knew her well. The listening audience would not have known her, however, because just as in *Aunt Sammy*, she had no name on the air.

Hewlett was fully aware of the essential role she played in the show's production, and when the show got picked up by NBC in 1932, she took it as a personal triumph. Even though she thought of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* as her baby, however, she was careful not to take too much of the credit at the time. Words like "hostess" and "cheer leader" imply a feminized, passive contribution to the program. Her choice of language to describe her role illustrates a strategy that she employed successfully for many years at WRVA: though she was critical to WRVA's daily operations, she avoided casting herself as competition to the male employees, and in so doing was able to move up in the ranks. There are no documents that indicate Hewlett ever lobbied for a management position, or demanded increased supervisory power – at least not publicly. To all outward appearance she was not seeking to take over a man's job, but by quietly making

³⁴ See, for example, the photographs in the show's fan magazine, *Smoke*. *Smoke* magazine collection, VCU: Lucy Papers.

herself indispensable she guaranteed promotion of a different kind. As WRVA grew, so did Hewlett's standing as the top female employee. Hewlett was hired as a woman to do a "woman's job." But she expanded that "women's sphere" until she had touched nearly all corners of the station's studios and business. Doing so was her first step in turning her job into a career.

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After a decade with the station, Hewlett was one of WRVA's most experienced and competent employees. She was familiar with business, programming, and technical considerations, and had worked with most of the employees at one time or another. She had professionalized her position as "hostess," and when WRVA went big-time when it started broadcasting at 50,000 watts in 1938, Hewlett was promoted to management.

WRVA was positioning itself as the mid-Atlantic's most dominant radio station in 1938, and Hewlett officially became its most powerful female employee. Hewlett had had *de facto* supervisory powers for years, but the station managers now granted her official status as a station manager.³⁵ Even for a woman as allegedly beloved and useful as Hewlett, the going was rough. She could exercise her authority so long as she did so as a woman and not as a boss. Once she assumed an official mantle of authority, her requests and suggestions became orders and demands, and she was met with some hostility.

³⁵ I have no way of knowing whether she asked for the promotion or whether it was a "reward." It is significant to note, however, that in the sometimes highly detailed personnel files of Walter R. Bishop and Calvin T. Lucy, nowhere is there a mention of Hewlett petitioning for anything. My best guess is that she never outright – or, at least, publicly – requested promotion.

Though female managers were rare in any American industry, Hewlett was not alone. After a generation of office work, a few women had swapped the stenographer's pad for a manager's desk. In 1942, career-booster Aimee Buchanan crowed:

At this very moment, business is the wide-open field of female self-expression ... an army of more than two million women goes every day to offices in the United States. This army has taken over a huge part of the business work load. Women are revolutionizing business offices. They are, in fact, the unheeded revolution itself – a wave of the great ocean of the industrial revolution that has been sweeping through the world since Arkwright patented his spinning jenny.³⁶

Buchanan admitted that women had to enter business through back doors, but her advice manual for working women, subtitled *The Career Woman's Own Machiavelli*, insisted that if women could get their foot on the lowest rung, they could – through hard work and occasional scheming – climb. Radio was a particularly promising industry, Buchanan suggested, because it required so many “office jobs.” She did not encourage women to seek jobs as announcers or entertainers or engineers, but steered “ambitious women” toward the industry’s “large secretarial and clerical staffs.” From these humble positions, she advised women to learn the business and “get a thorough grounding in radio” so they could seize opportunities for advancement if they arose.³⁷ While most women were not so fortunate as to leap into the higher-paying ranks of management, Hewlett did.

³⁶ Aimee Buchanan, *The Lady Means Business: How to Reach the Top in the Business World – the Career Woman's Own Machiavelli* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1942), ix.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

As early as 1938, Hewlett held a supervisory position over all employees in the Clerical Department, including two men.³⁸ In 1940, as WRVA expanded, Hewlett became Assistant Manager in the Traffic Department, the department she worked for until her full retirement in 1973.³⁹ By 1951 (and possibly earlier), she had become the full Traffic Manager, making her a Division Manager in the WRVA management hierarchy. Other than the station manager, the only manager to whom she reported was the program manager, Sam Carey. Also by 1951, two other women had jumped into the ranks of station management; Katherine Thompson managed "Continuity" and Emma L. Glinn was the "Studio Supervisor." The records do not clearly define the positions of "Continuity" manager and "Studio Supervisor," though it seems likely that both positions were similar to Hewlett's former duties as station hostess, and probably did not involve direct supervision of white men.⁴⁰

The Traffic Department's responsibilities were broad and constantly evolving. The position involved precision, organization, and constant communication with hundreds of people. In practice, the Traffic Department was in charge of everything from booking performers and guest speakers, to putting together the daily, weekly, and monthly radio schedules, to making sure that the programming itself was balanced.⁴¹ As Assistant Traffic Manager and then as the head of the department, Hewlett essentially continued to do the same office

³⁸ WRVA Organization Chart, 5 Aug. 1938, VCU: Lucy Papers.

³⁹ I.G. Abeloff to CTL and Barron Howard, Jan. 12, 1940, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁴⁰ WRVA Organization Chart [1951], UVA: WRVA Radio Station.

⁴¹ The Traffic Department was in charge of making sure "controversial" topics got fair play, per FCC regulations and trade guidelines. Bishop to Traffic Department, Dec. 24, 1955, UVA: WRVA Radio. See also "Annual Report, Studio and Commercial Departments, 1938," VCU: Lucy Papers.

work she had been doing her whole career, except now she had male and female employees working under her, and (presumably) she got paid better for her work.

Despite the fact that Hewlett's day-to-day work changed little, her promotion rubbed at least one employee the wrong way. He was the only one to record his feelings so that we might know them, but it is likely that others shared his opinions of Hewlett's ascension up the management ladder. A 1940 "Employee Satisfaction Evaluation" asked workers an astonishing set of questions to determine their loyalty to the station and to one another (and if those two loyalties might possibly conflict). When asked his main dissatisfaction with working at WRVA, one [male] employee wrote, "Don't like a woman boss," referring to Hewlett. Elsewhere in the evaluation, this anonymous employee answered "No" when asked "Do you think your department manager is the right person for the job?", but then failed to respond to the question "What is your main criticism of your department's manager?" Apparently, sex was enough. At least ten other people recorded criticisms of their department managers, even though they thought the manager was the right person for the job. No one offered any detailed criticism of Hewlett anywhere else in the evaluations. Significantly, in all the invasive questions asking employees to inform on co-workers ("Is there anyone unintentionally or otherwise developing a spirit of dissatisfaction or unrest? Which persons fail to cooperate with you?"), Hewlett was never mentioned, although at least fifteen different names were thrown out.⁴²

⁴² 1940 Employee Satisfaction Evaluation, VCU: Lucy Papers.

We can draw two conclusions from this snapshot of workplace opinion in the early 1940s. One, objections to Hewlett's promotion were not grounded in any material complaint, but in the simple fact that she was a woman in charge of men. Had she been in charge of other women, I doubt anyone would have raised objections. Two, Hewlett had avoided office gossip where most other managers had not. While this employee survey is by no means a comprehensive examination of WRVA work culture in the 1940s, we can at least be reasonably certain that in the early 1940s, at the point where Hewlett launched herself into management, she was playing a diplomatic hand. She made no complaints and no enemies; she did not advertise any burning ambition to unseat someone (the survey was thorough on this point). In many ways, she continued to carry herself as she had before: as WRVA's most important *female* employee, who had no designs on a "man's job" and sought merely to assist in whatever ways her "womanly" talents would permit.

In spite of her new management role, or maybe because of it, Hewlett continued to do regular secretarial and "hostessing" work, thus perpetuating her image as WRVA's helpful consort. Her promotion to Traffic Department management established her as a "career woman," but she continued to perform those "feminine" duties that she had been performing since her hiring. She continued to take dictation and assist the receptionists with the phones long after becoming a Division Manager.⁴³ Reading between the lines, it also becomes clear that she served as WRVA's "event planner" whenever large celebrations or

⁴³ At least as late as 1959, but possibly throughout the duration of her career. Walter Bishop, Draft of 1959 Public Relations Report, UVA: WRVA Radio.

promotions were in order. Technically, this should have fallen under the direction of the Public Relations Department, but Hewlett planned and orchestrated station events such as the annual "Easter Bonnet Contest."⁴⁴ Even once she had established a "male" career, she continued to feminize her work. She may have done so without thinking, or she may have done so to neutralize objections to her level of authority.⁴⁵

This brings us to the most interesting part of Hewlett's story. The detritus of office reports and memos tells us how she got her foot in the door at WRVA, inserted herself into everyday operations, and professionalized her "woman's work" into a management position. But how did she manage to hang on and even make headway in the postwar period? American workplaces became quite hostile to women in the Cold War period, but Hewlett weathered the storm. This is even more remarkable considering the deep conservatism of Virginia's leaders and WRVA managers such as Calvin Lucy. To fully understand how Hewlett, an unmarried, white woman living in mid-century Richmond, preserved her career at the same moment that thousands of Richmond women of all races were losing theirs, we need to situate her experience within larger cultural discourses of the

⁴⁴ Memorandum from Walter Bishop to Moulton, Eagles, Hewlett, Jordan, Lee, Cooke, and Bolick, April 14, 1960, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁴⁵ In fact, Aimee Buchanan implicitly advised women to strive to live up to men's ideas of the perfect woman while in the workplace. Amid common-sense advice about being punctual and performing duties efficiently, Buchanan recommends that women accept some of the obvious practices of discrimination without comment. "In every office there are a few ironclad rules, which may appear ridiculous to the outsider. These must be observed, and it is just as well not to indulge in grumbling about them. Such a rule, for instance, exists in most offices against women smoking. Men smoke all around her, but the girl who smokes must make up her mind to wait patiently for her lunch hour or rest period." Buchanan, *The Lady Means Business*, 73.

time about working women.⁴⁶ How did she avoid being swept away by the emerging, dominant belief that women should adopt “traditional” gender norms after the social upheavals of the Great Depression and the Second World War? Even more critically, how did she persist in carving out a career amid the reactionary politics of Harry Byrd’s Virginia in the 1950s?

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When writing WRVA’s history in the late 1960s, former station manager Calvin Lucy referred to Hewlett as “our ‘Gal Friday.’”⁴⁷ He meant the term as a compliment, granting Hewlett a piece of turf in WRVA’s past. But his choice of words is revealing of the expectations projected upon a white career woman in mid-twentieth-century Richmond. Not only would she have to feminize her position and make herself infinitely useful to retain it, but she would also have to “belong” to everyone. The unmarried Hewlett would, in a sense, wed herself to her career, and to the male colleagues who shared it.⁴⁸ Gal Friday, separated from ideals of white womanhood by her singlehood and career, occupied a liminal position in the southern – and, to a less extent, American – workforce. Though her workplace experience was circumscribed at every turn by heavily gendered expectations, she was neither “wife” nor “dependent,” and therefore

⁴⁶ In fact, WRVA laid off at least a dozen female workers after World War II, including the manager of WRVA’s Norfolk studio, a “Miss Mary McCabe.” CTL, “The Voice of Virginia,” 1966, LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Had Hewlett been married, it is unlikely that WRVA would have hired her, and even less likely that WRVA would have eventually promoted her. As Grace Coyle explained forcefully in 1929, “Employers and employment managers look with suspicion upon married women, although the basis for this attitude seems to rest less upon a scientific study of the relative efficiency of married women than a commendable desire to defend the ‘American home’ from subversive tendencies.” Grace L. Coyle, “Women in the Clerical Occupations,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 143, no. 1 (1929): 180-187.

had a measure of agency in defining her relations with colleagues that she would not otherwise have had. Hewlett seized this potential, and skillfully navigated a career in an oft-times hostile industry.

In 1955, just a few years after Hewlett became a division manager for WRVA, Mamie J. Meredith, a linguist interested in onomastics, published an article in *American Speech* analyzing common slang referring to working women. Specifically, she examined the trajectory of terms like “Rosie the Riveter,” “Mimeo Minnie,” and “Girl Friday” in the years after the Second World War.⁴⁹ Rosie, the iconic archetype of the female industrial worker, dropped out of sight in the 1950s, as men replaced women in the industrial labor force. But “Mimeo Minnie” and “Girl Friday” remained part of the workplace slang, mostly because the female office workers to which the terms referred retained their jobs.⁵⁰ “Girl Friday” was not a relic like the unemployed Rosie, but rather was a worker well adapted to the postwar economy and political climate. Girl Friday was hard-working and possibly ambitious, but took on the role of office consort rather than competitor. White-collar working women, argued Meredith in 1955, “maintain their prestige in peace as in war.”⁵¹ The best way to “maintain prestige” was to uphold conventional gender norms as much as possible in the workplace. WRVA wartime employee Mary McCabe lost her job as the station manager at

⁴⁹ Mamie J. Meredith, “‘Mimeo Minnie,’ ‘Sadie, the Office Secretary,’ and Other Women Office Workers in America,” *American Speech* 30, no. 4 (December 1955): 299-301.

⁵⁰ Historian Elyce Rotella argues that women had numerically “taken over” clerical work by 1930, comprising 52.5% of the clerical workforce. From the 1920s onward, popular conceptions of clerical work as feminine reflected this transition. Demobilized men, therefore, would be less likely to seek clerical positions such as “Mimeo Minnie’s,” which is why many female office workers were able to keep their jobs. See Elyce J. Rotella, *From Home to Office: U.S. Women at Work, 1870-1930* (Ann Arbor: MI Research Press, 1981), 151.

⁵¹ Meredith, “‘Mimeo Minnie.’”

the station's Norfolk studios; presumably the position was *too* "masculine" for a woman to hold in peacetime, particularly if she was taking the job away from a man. But Bertha Hewlett, by adopting a style of leadership that emphasized the "femininity" of her positions as hostess and Traffic Manager, brought her Gal Friday career into the Cold War era.

Even though she describes herself in the same terms Mamie Meredith used to define the archetype, Hewlett never referred to herself as Gal Friday, possibly because the term came to have connotations she would have rejected. The term, which emerged in the 1920s, referred to an especially loyal female employee who would assist any co-worker in need of her. Gal Friday might pursue tasks of her own, but her most valued skill was in assisting her male colleagues. She was an office wife, and as such could be the subject of much fantasizing and harassment, as graphically illustrated in a pictorial essay in a May 1956 issue of *Playboy*. In his article entitled "The Perfect Secretary: Valuable Tips for Your Girl Friday," Arv Miller suggests the ideal office helpmate should wear low-cut dresses, let her panties fall down around her ankles, offer her breasts as either golf tees or an ashtray (depending on the situation), and pose nude if required, among other things.⁵² According to *Playboy*, Gal Friday was not only an indispensable, submissive assistant, but also a sex bunny. While demeaning, the transformation from faithful, valued assistant to big-breasted, alluring, faithful, valued assistant made sense. As historian Elaine Tyler May thoroughly investigated in her ground-breaking monograph *Homeward Bound*,

⁵² Arv Miller, "The Perfect Secretary," *Playboy* (May 1956): 45-49; See also "Playboy's Girl Friday," *Playboy* (September 1957): 39.

American popular culture was celebrating the hyper-feminine, sexy, white housewife in the 1950s.⁵³ It stands to reason that the office wife, or Gal Friday, would undergo a similar transformation.

By being a “Gal Friday” – a hard-working woman of resourcefulness and efficiency who, in a sense, “belonged” to every man in the office – Hewlett managed to hold on to her job and even advance her career during the hostile postwar years for working women. But she avoided being cast as a *Playboy* fantasy. By the time she received the promotion to division manager, she was 47 years old and unmarried, but rather than talk about herself as the office “Gal Friday” as others talked about her, she took a different tack. By the middle of her career, Hewlett was describing herself not as a “Gal Friday,” but as one of WRVA’s “founding fathers,” those visionaries who had flown by the seat of their pants (or skirts, in this case) to get the station off the ground and keep it running in the early years. Describing herself not as a Gal-Friday-type but as a founding father had its advantages: Gal Friday could not be a manager, especially of men, because she was a female helpmate. But a “founding father” held an altogether different authority that trumped liabilities of gender.

By playing up her role as one of WRVA’s founding fathers, Hewlett demanded respect and deference from her co-workers. She was fond of reminding other employees of the length of her tenure, especially Public Relations Director Walter R. Bishop. Bishop held one of the most important positions at the studio, but he had joined the staff two weeks after she had, a

⁵³ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, rev. ed., (New York: BasicBooks, 1999).

point Hewlett enjoyed emphasizing: "I got there about two weeks before he did. I got there before he did, he didn't come until two weeks after the station opened," she insisted, a decade after Bishop had passed away.⁵⁴ In 1970, the station manager circulated a memo entitled "Recipe for Piled-High-with-Pride Radio Station" that included the number of years everyone had worked for WRVA. Hewlett topped the list at 45. The next longest-serving employee was Malcolm Roddenberry with 40. The average employee had worked there 23.5 years.⁵⁵ Hewlett was the most senior staff by five years, and had worked there almost twice as long as the average long-time employee. She was not just an experienced worker, she was the core of institutional memory.

When station founder and former manager Calvin Lucy wrote his history of WRVA in the 1960s, he made it clear that he thought of himself and Hewlett as the experts, the librarians, and the archivists. They wrote the history in consultation, emphasizing the events and memories they considered to be most significant. The history was probably skewed toward their own experiences, which only serves to emphasize Hewlett's importance as a founding father. Calvin Lucy presented Hewlett's history (along with his own) as the *station's* history. She had, in effect, Gal Friday-ed the entire station. Its history was now married to hers.

Indeed, most of the WRVA publications that Lucy and others have used to reconstruct the station's history originated from Hewlett's desk. Hewlett was in charge of writing *Smoke* magazine for the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* members, and

⁵⁴ CD-554: "Bertha Hewlett Interview, unknown interviewer, [1975]," LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁵⁵ "Recipe for Piled-High-with-Pride Radio Station," [1970], LVA: WRVA Radio.

probably also the monthly *WRVA Dialog* that went out to all registered WRVA listeners. She selected the photographs that went into the publications, and probably wrote most of the copy. Either for reasons of pride or calculation, she used the opportunity to insert herself directly into the station's image. The photograph accompanying the *WRVA Dialog* write-up of the station's twentieth anniversary celebrations in 1945, for example, showed Lucy, Hewlett, and Bishop standing proudly in front of the station's banner, instead of the many VIPs who crowded the microphones.⁵⁶ In 1958, when WRVA celebrated the fifteenth anniversary of its move into the Richmond Hotel studios, the photographer snapped a picture of Hewlett standing in the center of six WRVA male officials.⁵⁷ She was not only the center of the photo, but she took the place of honor next to the three-tiered white cake, as though Hewlett were the bride and the other male officials the grooms.⁵⁸ At every major public event, Hewlett was in the center of the photos with a corsage and white gloves. Hewlett's inclusion in WRVA's development meant everything to her. "I'll say right here that I'm very proud to say that I was able and still am able to say that I have seen every phase of WRVA from the beginning," she reflected in 1975. "Every time they changed the power, every time they went from one place to the other, I have seen and been right there with them."⁵⁹

Hewlett thought of herself as a founding father, and some of her most powerful colleagues agreed. She had a right to claim that she had seen every

⁵⁶ *WRVA Dialog*, Dec. 1945, LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁵⁷ Roddenberry, Repine, Beadles, Bishop, Raabe, Ivey.

⁵⁸ Photograph, "15th Anniversary of Move into Hotel Richmond," 1958, LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁵⁹ CD-554: "Bertha Hewlett Interview, unknown interviewer, [1975]," LVA: WRVA Radio.

phase and been a part of every transition WRVA had experienced in its first fifty years. But she had not always been respected or recognized for her contributions. She had gained ground, bit by bit and year by year, in the leadership structure of the WRVA studios – the only woman to do so. “I wouldn’t take anything for my career,” she told an interviewer in 1993.⁶⁰ Tracing the career for which she fought so hard, and of which she was so fiercely proud, helps us understand how white women could create spaces for themselves amid the dominant expectations of white femininity and domesticity in Harry Byrd’s Virginia. She cloaked herself in the words and appearances of traditional white womanhood – but her daily job simultaneously undercut the very gender norms she was superficially replicating. By borrowing from different gender- and race-based stereotypes – the useful Gal Friday, the respectable white woman – Hewlett put together a package of career woman that her co-workers could accept. She implicitly demanded authority and respect as a founding father even as she made herself non-threatening by assuming the traditional white female role of helpmate. This two-pronged strategy was the adze that levered her into the fraternal radio industry and kept her there.

⁶⁰ Linda Livengood, “89-Year-Old Veteran of Live Radio Still Contributes Her Expertise,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Feb. 1, 1993, C2.

Chapter 4

"A Big Hillbilly Operation"

In 1947, the *New York Herald-Tribune* ran a tourism piece on Richmond, "a Busy, Modern City Mixing Industry with History." The article described Richmond's tobacco-based manufacturing economy as "Depression-proof" – a high form of praise indeed, coming on the heels of the greatest economic depression the country had ever seen. Richmond tobacco manufacturers churned out nearly one-third of the billions of cigarettes sold annually, making the city the "world's cigarette capital."¹ Tredegar Iron Works, once the arsenal of the Confederacy, had proudly supplied the U.S. military during the war, and now kept busy with the materiel of America's postwar building boom. The article's implicit argument was that Richmond was no longer a city of the past, and its promising and thoroughly modern economy was its ticket to American greatness.

Richmond, along with much of the rest of the South, pulsed with renewed energy and cash after the Second World War. The city grew by an average of 7,000 people a year from 1940 until 1954, becoming home to an increasingly diverse population.² Many newcomers, as well as many long-time residents, seemed to have different ideas about their "place" in the postwar world. *Ladies Home Journal* ran a feature piece about women organizing as a critical voting bloc in the 1947 elections for municipal reform. Considering the fact that women's suffrage had been fiercely opposed in Richmond just thirty years

¹ "Richmond a Busy, Modern City Mixing Industry with History," *New York Herald-Tribune*, Dec. 14, 1947: sec. V, p. 11.

² Research Department for the Richmond Chamber of Commerce, "Richmond Facts 1954," UVA: WRVA Radio.

earlier, journalist Margaret Hickey was impressed. "Richmond, Virginia, is out of the doldrums," she wrote.³ Once they had passed municipal reform, the women of Richmond (along with the men) came out in large numbers to vote for a slate of nine City Councilmen in the spring of 1948.⁴ Oliver Hill, a local attorney and leading member of the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund, became the first African American in 52 years to sit on Richmond's City Council. The people of Richmond seemed poised to make a stark break with the past.⁵

Even with a modern economy, a black elected official, and politically empowered women, Richmond still had a foot in the past. "History is the constant companion of the visitor to Richmond," claimed the *New York Herald-Tribune* article. Writing for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1948, native Richmonder J. Bryan, III, remarked "A sense of continuity pervades much of Richmond's thought. The past is always present. Someone has said that a Richmonder's favorite topic, next to the vulgarities of North Carolinians, is his own ancestors."⁶ Indeed, memories of the "Old South" were everywhere: statues of Confederate generals on Monument Avenue, a racially segregated labor force, and of course the smells of tobacco manufacturing. Richmond was also very

³ Margaret Hickey, "'Get out the Vote'...Reform in Richmond," *Ladies Home Journal* 65 (June 1948): 23, 178, 180, 181.

⁴ For a lengthy analysis of Richmond's municipal reform efforts of the late 1940s, please see Virginius Dabney, *Richmond: The Story of a City*, rev. ed. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), 334-335. For a general discussion of the significance of municipal reform movements in the post-war South, see James Charles Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999). Cobb argues that "the post-World War II era [in the South] saw the reins of power pass to more dynamic, metropolitan-oriented elites who sought fuller integration of both local and state economies into the national and global economy." Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture*, 28.

⁵ The event was significant enough that *Life* magazine ran a photograph of Hill taking the oath of office. Hill, the lone African American in the picture, stands among a dozen or so seated white men. "Richmond Installs a Negro," *Life* 25 (September 27, 1948): 47.

⁶ J. Bryan, III, "The Cities of America: Richmond" *Saturday Evening Post* 221 (Aug. 28, 1948): 30-31, 72, 74, 76.

much a Jim Crow city in the postwar period. Oliver Hill could serve on City Council with white men, but he could not attend a show in any of the city's theaters and sit beside them. Nor could he send his children to the same schools as their children. Legislative campaigns such as the 1902 constitutional convention and the 1924 Racial Integrity Act had translated racial discrimination into widespread legal policy, which was still in force in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Despite the efforts of progressives and reformers, Richmond in 1940 functioned much as it had in 1900.

In 1952, the Richmond Chamber of Commerce gave Richmond a new slogan: "Gateway to the Growing South."⁷ WRVA had long ago made the suggestion that Richmond was a portal between the rest of the country or world and the South when it identified itself as broadcasting from "Down Where the South Begins." But what was the growing South going to look like? Would it cast itself in the Northeast's image? The Midwest's? Both slogans suggested a distinctive southern identity that was unfixed, but the Chamber of Commerce slogan implied *change* and *transition*. The question was, with history as a constant companion, how much could the region transform?

As the "Voice of Virginia," WRVA would be part of the postwar debate about Richmond's, Virginia's, and even the South's new identity. Historian Morton Sosna has argued that the Second World War did at least as much if not more to change the South as the Civil War. If the Civil War "gave the South a regional identity unique within the United States," dividing the region's history into an "Old South" and a "New South," the Second World War turned the South into

⁷ 1952 Chamber of Commerce pamphlet, UVA: WRVA Radio.

“an arena where the forces of good and evil, progress and reaction, rapid changes and seemingly timeless continuity were about to engage in a battle of near mythological proportions.”⁸ Many historians, though not all as emphatic as Sosna, regard the Second World War as the primary catalyst in the transformation of the region.⁹ Industrialization, urbanization, out-migration, and protests against racial discrimination intensified during and after the war with such velocity that there could be no return to the pre-war status quo. Historian James Cobb suggests that George Orwell could have been talking about the American South when he wrote, “if the war didn’t kill you, it was bound to start you thinking.”¹⁰ Of course, not everyone was thinking the same thing, and while black southerners seized the moment to fight Jim Crow at home and abroad, many white southern leaders, argues Cobb, began “agonizing about their region’s backwardness but also expressing their fears about the loss of cultural identity and virtue that might accompany the accelerating effort to modernize their society.”¹¹ In Virginia, WRVA broadcasters and listeners would use the radio station as a public space for the debate, turning the “Voice of Virginia” into a seminar on Virginia’s future, and perhaps the future of the postwar South.

⁸ Morton Sosna, “Introduction,” in *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South*, edited by Neil R. McMillen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), xiii. Morton Sosna, “The G.I.’s South and the North-South Dialogue during World War II,” in Winfred B. Moore, Jr., Joseph F. Tripp, and Lyon G. Tyler, Jr., *Developing Dixie: Modernization in a Traditional Society* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988): 322.

⁹ See Neil R. McMillen, ed., *Remaking Dixie*; Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); Dewey W. Grantham, *The South in Modern America: A Region at Odds* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994); Bill C. Malone and David Stricklin, *Southern Music/American Music*, rev. ed. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003).

¹⁰ Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture*, 36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

This chapter explores WRVA's decision in the late 1940s to move away from a diverse slate of national programming to more local-based programming, including an emphasis on what WRVA officials referred to as "hillbilly" entertainment. WRVA's move away from national programming was in part a response to confusion in Virginia over the relative desirability of the "traditional" and the "modern," labels that often masked complex tensions.¹² When confronting large social and political transformations like desegregation, for example, observers frequently fell back onto the traditional/modern binary to make sense of it all, conflating the traditional/modern dialectic with dialectics of race or gender or sexuality.¹³ WRVA officials, acting in what they believed to be the best interests of the station's fiscal health, chose to convert much of their line-up to hillbilly music and rhythms of the land rather than, say, rock 'n' roll or rhythms of the city. Their broadcasting choices, and the listeners' responses to

¹² One of the most pressing questions for the postwar South, for example, was whether an agricultural economy could survive mechanization and the mass migration of farmers to cities. Contemporaries often rephrased the question as a binary choice between the "farming way of life" (traditional) and "city ways" (modern). Throughout the chapter, I will attempt to be precise in my use of the terms, though generally I will use "traditional" to describe any dominant behaviors, beliefs, or values that folks held in the early twentieth century, and "modern" to describe any trend or expectation that would revise existing economic, political, social, or racial systems of the late 1940s and 1950s.

¹³ Queer studies have much to offer scholars of southern history by way of unpacking the cultural binaries that informed much of the region's social thought and practices, of which traditional/modern is one. John Howard's groundbreaking research into the lives of gay men in post-World War II Mississippi raises provocative questions about Mississippians' reliance upon binaries like man/woman, black/white, and heterosexual/homosexual to structure public discourse, when the allegedly rigid binaries were routinely flouted in private or "unspoken" life. John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999). Siobhan Somerville has interrogated bifurcated constructions of "black bodies" and "white bodies," and has concluded that the cultural binaries that emerged in the early twentieth century were heavily dependent upon one another. Understandings of male/female or homosexual/heterosexual underscored and reinforced one another, and were heavily dependent on acceptance of a black/white binary that emerged chiefly from southern states' implementation of Jim Crow laws. Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). Taking my cue from Howard and Somerville, I am attempting to identify the spoken or explicit articulation of cultural binaries in mid-twentieth-century Virginia, while simultaneously exploring the implicit, ubiquitous challenges to those binaries.

them, open a window not only into the historical significance of the hillbilly icon, but also into the slippages of a social system based on discourses of opposition that were wearing thin.

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No southern icon was more of a flashpoint for debates over the South's past, present, and future than the hillbilly – that empty-pocketed, uneducated, hard-working, white farmer from the hinterland.¹⁴ All kinds of people, from all kinds of places, articulated understandings of race, class, and gender through the mythic hick, and had been doing so for several decades by the end of the Second World War. When WRVA decided to use the hillbilly to secure WRVA's position in an increasingly competitive media market, it was as yet unresolved whether the hillbilly was an asset or an embarrassment (or both) to either a modern America or a modern South. WRVA's programming would cast the hillbilly in a nostalgic light, as the loveable and perhaps heroic ambassador of a better way of life, now lost. By employing the hillbilly to fulfill the station's financial and civic obligations, however, WRVA unwittingly became one of the most accessible forums for debate over the very questions that the hillbilly himself could not resolve.

Simultaneously a character of derision and respect, of repulsion and longing, the American hillbilly was a vehicle for Americans to come to terms with rapid change throughout the twentieth century. Hillbillies lived in this world, but

¹⁴ A note on my use of the word "hillbilly." I do not use the word to describe an actual person, but rather an icon or persona. Hillbillies did not exist except as ideas and images. I do, however, use the term as an adjective when describing people or products, such as hillbilly entertainers or hillbilly music.

seemed to follow rhythms of a parallel world, in which industry and commerce were largely invisible, if not altogether absent; in which religion, family, and the land played the largest roles in people's lives. There were, of course, no *real* hillbillies, but that did not stop people from applying and acquiring the label.

The American hillbilly was hard to define but easy to identify by the time radio had become a mass medium in the 1930s. Hillbillies, according to popular culture, were people of Anglo-Saxon descent, living in remote rural areas (especially in the southern mountains), with only a passing acquaintance with education or the trappings of modern America.¹⁵ The hillbilly was always white, and almost always male.¹⁶ Hillbilly entertainers feigned confusion with city ways, and peddled heavily in nostalgia. As such, they were depicted as keepers of the past even as they were derided for being ridiculously and maybe even pathologically backwards. They thus held the dubious honor of simultaneously being held up as national heroes and hopeless hicks.

¹⁵ Most historians of country music, such as Bill Malone and the authors of numerous country music encyclopedias, have identified hillbilly music as being a product of southern mountain regions. See Bill C. Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 2nd rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of an Old Southern Sound* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1992); Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008). Recently, historian Paul Tyler has argued that, while it is true that "hillbilly or country music is comfortably at home in the South," "there is no evidence that regional style was ever *the* determining factor in selecting or rejecting artists to appear on [a hillbilly program such as] the Barn Dance, at least before World War II." According to Tyler, rural connotations were much more important than southern connotations. The overwhelming popularity of Iowan Mary Workman ("Sunshine Sue") on WRVA supports Tyler's point. Paul L. Tyler, "The Rise of Rural Rhythm," in Chad Berry, ed., *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 31.

¹⁶ It is important to note here, however, that the authentic past that hillbillies "sold" was often created by and for women, as Kristine McCusker has argued. My next chapter will deal specifically with the apertures in American power systems that a "female hillbilly" could exploit. See McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls, Honky-Tonk Angels*.

Although there was no consensus in America whether the hillbilly was respectable and heroic or uncivilized and embarrassing, hillbilly music was another matter. Performances of hillbilly music became nothing less than performances of national identity for many Americans.¹⁷ In the 1920s and 1930s, legions of anthropologists and folklorists descended upon the Appalachian region like locusts in order to “discover” and preserve the music and culture of an allegedly pure Anglo-Saxon America.¹⁸ Americans, especially white Americans who were uncomfortable with the urban, black, bluesy tunes that emanated from the Mississippi River towns and big cities on the East Coast, saw a wholesome alternative in the sentimental, traditional music of mountain people. The music also offered a powerful symbol of rootedness – something that the immigrant nation sought obsessively in the first half of the twentieth century. Franklin Roosevelt seemed to understand the power of this symbol when his staff included hillbilly music in a program to entertain the king and queen of England in June 1939.¹⁹ The hillbilly produced evidence of “authentic Americana,”

¹⁷ Certainly not all Americans embraced hillbilly music as representative of their personal or collective identity. James Weldon Johnson, speaking in 1935 to a Booklovers' Club for African Americans in Wichita, Kansas, reportedly stated that “the cowboy and hill-billy songs are debasement of music in that they came down from other forms. But Negro folk songs are a growth out of emotion.” He also argued that “The only things which sprang from American soil which are recognized all over the world as distinctly American, and which have permeated American civilization, were created by the Negro.” *The Negro Star* (Wichita, KS), March 29, 1935, 1.

¹⁸ The first waves of documenters were individuals recently empowered by progressive thought and the recent establishment of social sciences. Their efforts were given further legitimacy during the 1930s when New Deal initiatives employed hundreds of Americans to seek out and catalog “authentic” American experiences in the hinterlands. For a discussion of the first wave of folklorists and the link to the New Deal, see Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 142-149 in particular. See also Jane S. Becker, *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

¹⁹ Kristine M. McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls, Honky-Tonk Angels*, 82-84. The Roosevelt Administration believed the hillbilly music would demonstrate that the United States was “the most genuine (legitimate, virtuous) nation on earth,” and in the process create an American

preserving an undiluted vestige of "pioneer America."²⁰ Even if he was himself a comedic figure, his work was vital to national interests. According to some, the hillbilly's tunes were the very music of American nationalism.²¹

Hillbillies and their music as symbols of an allegedly pure [white] American past were one thing, but what if real-life mountain people emerged from the radio or comic strips to bump elbows with everyone else in America's crowded cities? To many Americans it seemed as though hillbillies were crawling down "from the hills and hollers" in droves in the late 1940s and 1950s.²² For many Americans of limited means, high-paying war jobs lured rural dwellers from economically and environmentally impoverished farmland during the Second World War. When the war ended, the movement from farm to city only gathered speed as mechanized farming reduced the need for farm workers and made the dream of obtaining and maintaining one's own farm harder than it had been even during the Great Depression. And so the farm people left. As cities swelled with millions of rural emigrants, it must have seemed to some city-dwellers that the

identity out of the bewildering struggles and divisions of the previous decade. This national identity, as articulated through hillbilly music, would, the Roosevelts hoped, "make the transition from an isolationist American culture to one that was ready to fight the Nazis."

²⁰ "And That Is Hay," *Newsweek* (May 3, 1943): 64, 66; Horace Reynolds, "Old Tunes Evoke Historic Memories: Music and Verse Help the Nation Recover More Knowledge of Its History," *Christian Science Monitor*, mag. section (Oct. 23, 1948): 8-9.

²¹ Regina Bendix explores the connection between authenticity and nationalism in the early twentieth century at length in her book *In Search of Authenticity*. She argues that "the most powerful modern political movement, nationalism, builds on the essentialist notions inherent in authenticity, and folk in the guise of native cultural discovery and rediscovery has continually served nationalism movements since the Romantic era." Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 7.

²² Don Eddy, "Hillbilly Heaven," *American Magazine* (March 1952): 28-29, 119-123. Quotation from 28. It was not an allusion. Historian Pete Daniel surveyed the demographic data available, and found that of the 3 million farms in the United States in 1940, only 1.2 million remained in 1970. Tenant farming and share cropping all but disappeared during that same time period as agribusiness consolidated land and cultivation. Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 9.

hillbilly on the stage or radio had only been a vanguard of an invasion as real as any previous wave of immigration.

Rural emigrants soon learned they were about as welcome in America's cities – especially the Midwestern ones – as other groups of immigrants had been. "It is one of the curious ironies of our times," remarked one commentator, "that these people with deep ancestral roots in this country are experiencing...the same kinds of difficulties in adjustment that immigrants are having in coastal cities."²³ City-dwellers complained that the new-comers did not understand the rules of modern life, and seemed to have no interest in learning. According to one woman in Indianapolis, "those people" "can't or won't hold a job, they flout the law constantly and neglect their children, they drink too much and their moral standards would shame an alley cat. For some reason or other, they absolutely refuse to accommodate themselves to any kind of decent, civilized life."²⁴ Rural people made safer caricatures than neighbors, apparently.

For their part, farmers – especially from the South – must have felt that "progress" was erasing their way of life. Pushed off their farms, they no doubt often found life in even medium-sized cities confusing and humiliating. Men accustomed to working on their own schedule, even if they did not own the land they worked, were now under the constant surveillance of supervisors and clocks. Families that were accustomed to space found themselves crammed into densely populated, overpriced rental properties. Racial systems that were familiar, if always contested, were eroding under the pressure of African

²³ James A. Maxwell, "Down from the Hills and into the Slums," *The Reporter* (Dec. 13, 1956): 27-29.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

American civil rights activism and the social chaos of cramped city life.

Mechanized agriculture, agribusiness, highways, and a budding civil rights movement were disrupting traditional rural social systems, which historian Pete Daniel has suggested “generated immense constructive and destructive energy that forged both hope and fear, joy and sorrow.”²⁵

Technological innovation, agricultural regulation, and vastly increased infrastructure had profoundly transformed the habitat of the mythic hillbilly, and of all rural people, by the 1950s. The anxieties of rural Americans, and the disdain and longing of urban Americans, were projected onto the caricatured hillbilly, who seemed to represent a past that had become unmoored by modernity. As with any caricature, a constant tension existed between the presentation and the represented. Debates over the hillbilly at mid-century were really debates over the future of postwar America, in which norms of race, class, and gender were all undergoing heavy revision.

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As with any subject of cultural curiosity, the hillbilly was also lucrative. In the early 1920s, Okeh Record executive Ralph Peer believed Americans – native- and foreign-born alike – would pay money to listen to “roots” music. Okeh began releasing two new genres of music: “race” and “hillbilly,” the former referring to African American blues and the latter to rural white music.²⁶ The hillbilly recordings did so well that other record producers followed suit, traveling

²⁵ Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s*, 8.

²⁶ Initially, the musical genres were not so different. Historian Tracey Laird credits the categorization with the eventual divergence of black and white rural music. Tracey E. W. Laird, *Louisiana Hayride: Radio and Roots Music Along the Red River* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005): 43-44.

into the field in search of the “genuine” article. By the late 1920s, hillbilly musicians were on the radio, too, where they made significantly more money than through recordings. Station owners, too, learned that they could make immense money by putting itinerant hillbilly artists on the air, who would often accept considerably less compensation than other performers. Broadcasters called these hillbilly get-togethers “barn dances,” evoking images of casual socializing they hoped would resonate with a rural audience. In 1924, Chicago radio station WLS launched the *National Barn Dance*, showcasing dozens of hillbilly performers at a regular time. The next year, Nashville station WSM followed suit with the *Grand Ole Opry*. The golden era of radio barn dance had begun.

Programs like the *Grand Ole Opry* and especially the *National Barn Dance* had proven to broadcasters as early as the 1930s that hillbilly variety shows could be profitable in rural *and* urban markets.²⁷ Barn dance performances varied somewhat, but programs tended to articulate variations of a common script. Early radio barn dances of the 1920s relied on amateur, rotating musicians who made performance decisions based on mood and ability rather than preconceived decisions. Itinerant musicians might have been

²⁷ WRVA's *Corn Cob Pipe Club* was not, strictly speaking, a barn dance, though both barn dances and variety shows like the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* were attempting to commercialize many of the same sounds. A key difference between the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* and most of the radio barn dances was the *Pipe Club's* emphasis on its interracial cast and inclusion of black singers. The *National Barn Dance* on WLS-Chicago, for example, “render[ed] invisible some of those who were part of Chicago’s ethnically and racially diverse landscape – typically black and Jews.” Kristine McCusker notes that this rendering of invisibility was an “odd choice since much of WLS’s music had black roots, and Jews were key contributors to vaudeville’s development.” But on WLS, African Americans, if represented at all, were cast into the role of passive and uncomplaining “bystanders” to slavery. I do not believe there were any black performers on the *National Barn Dance*. See McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels*, 31-32.

unpredictable, but they were also dirt cheap. By the early 1930s, however, barn dances had a steadier, professional cast and a familiar choreography. Folksy personalities wearing folksy clothing like “bluejeans and hayseed shirts, coveralls and pigtails,” performed live on Saturday nights in large, city theatres. Barn dances could last up to four hours, though radio audiences usually only heard a 30- or 60-minute selection of them.²⁸ Listener surveys indicated that city-dwellers could not get enough of it, making the barn dances about as popular as any other program on the dial.

The barn dances were intentionally depicting “tradition” as an alternative to the cultural chaos that radio broadcasting itself propagated. Stars, who humbly and repeatedly referenced their “boondock” origins (with varying degrees of truthfulness), regaled the audience with sentimental ballads, instrumental numbers, and skits that relied on humor that was suitable for your grandmother’s parlor. In the words of historian Kristine McCusker, the barn dance offered up “a work of vernacular (common, traditional) art kept safe and secure” by generations of rural women. “They promised stability and comfort in an era when both seemed lacking, and they were wildly successful.”²⁹ Through the trials of the Great Depression and then the Second World War, barn dance music was supposed to remind listeners of happy childhood memories, Mom, and a time when life was predictable.

Historian Chad Berry argues that “ironically, such a program so cleverly and deliberately cast as a folksy, wholesome, straitlaced, domestic, and rustic

²⁸ John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 479.

²⁹ McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls, Honky-Tonk Angels*, 2.

affair was firmly rooted in industrial capitalism.”³⁰ Indeed, barn dances sold their “authentic,” pre-industrial sensibilities with an entrepreneurial acumen that any Wall Street investor could respect. *National Barn Dance* producer John Lair, for example, required hillbilly musician Lily May Ledford to wear her hair in a bun and put on no-frill dresses while on stage. He also forbade her from wearing stylish clothing or make-up because he thought such an image would undercut the nostalgia for traditional womanhood his Chicago program was trying to sell.³¹ Such a paradox was not ironic, however, because the barn dance was never intended to be anything truly authentic, but rather an “authentic” product being peddled by a commercial sell-out. Barn dances plucked rural musicians from the hinterlands, put them on a stage, and then had them perform to urban and rural listeners alike, all while living and working in cities. The term “hillbilly” connoted a commercial taint; any performer who referred to him- or herself as a hillbilly acknowledged the fence-sitting of the enterprise. The hillbilly was the ambassador, and the emigrant. Performers and audiences alike, hay bales on the set notwithstanding, understood that something would be lost in translation, but accepted the arrangement anyway.

Cultural critics were somewhat at a loss to generalize the barn dances from the 1920s until the Second World War. Predictably, write-ups contained elements of both condescension and admiration for the music and its fans. In

³⁰ Berry, ed, *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance*, 6.

³¹ Ledford complained that she “felt like an old lady and not at all pretty” in the no-frills costume she had to wear on stage. In retaliation, she made sure to curl her hair and wear more stylish clothing any time she was not on stage. Lisa Yarger, “Banjo-Pickin’ Girl: Representing Lily May Ledford,” M.A. Thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. 1997. As quoted in McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls, Honky-Tonk Angels*, 90.

1928, the *New York Times* spoke favorably of station KDKA's (Pittsburgh) effort to bring barn dance music to "Eskimos" of indeterminate northern location on Christmas Eve so that they might celebrate the Christian holiday by doing "the old square dances taught them by the crews of whaling vessels in years past."³² The article implied that square dancing – a practice associated strongly with rural and hillbilly music – belonged to "years past." But the article also implied that as old and out-of-date as barn dances might be, they were still more advanced than Inuit culture, and might contribute to the civilizing of the arctic dwellers. Other articles made more direct and less good-natured points about barn dances' "backwardness." A 1926 *New York Times* review referred to a traveling group of hillbilly fiddlers as "rustic Paganinis," illustrating a common pattern of praise tinged with derision. "It was not music of the highest order, perhaps, but it was music with form and melody, and perfectly adapted for its intended use."³³ High art it was not, but critics acknowledged that the funny-dressed folks had a place in mass culture all the same.

By the war years, much of the criticism had mellowed into tolerance and perhaps grudging respect, even if barn dance performers and fans were still objects of amusement. The press continued to compare the hillbilly throw-downs to "real" art like opera or classical music, implying that the two could never be the same or equal. But reviewers began to concede that barn dance performances had a respectable place in the American cultural pantheon. In 1943, the *Washington Post* noted with no small amount of amusement that at least one

³² "KDKA To Broadcast Barn Dance to Arctic," *New York Times*, Dec. 24, 1928, 14.

³³ "Topics of the Times," *New York Times*, Jan. 12, 1926, 30.

New Yorker visiting Chicago confused a *National Barn Dance* crowd waiting outside Chicago's Eighth Street Theater with opera-goers. The theater housed both.³⁴ Perhaps, the article implied, the two types of entertainment – or their fans – were not all that dissimilar.³⁵

And even if readers were not convinced that barn dances occupied a position alongside other respected art forms, there was no denying their financial success. "The corn is as high as an elephant's eye – and so are the profits," *Newsweek* quoted one "hard-bitten Tin Pan Alley character" as saying in 1949.³⁶ One-time barn dance performers like Gene Autry of the *National Barn Dance* achieved such prosperity that the Hollywood elite began courting hillbilly stars.³⁷ As with many programming decisions, dollars probably would have trumped critical acclaim anyway. The sheer popularity of the barn dances, especially in urban markets, made the model lucrative for decades.

³⁴ "Next Week's Is 500th Show for National Barn Dance," *Washington Post*, April 25, 1943, L3

³⁵ The public debates about "high brow" and "low brow" culture are well documented in the work of Lawrence Levine and others. Levine has argued that distinctions between "high" and "low" culture emerged in the late nineteenth century as upper-class Americans appropriated and the established proprietary rights over Shakespeare, classical music, and fine art, largely as a means of distancing themselves from the growing working and middle classes. "Low brow" culture was the commercialized culture of working-class Americans that was widely popular, but looked upon as inferior to "high brow" culture by prominent social critics. Lawrence W Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). For an example of the sorts of criticism that contemporaries could and did lob at entertainment they considered "low brow" – such as the barn dances – please see Walter Murdoch's 1937 polemic on the worthlessness of the "low brow" individual: "If anyone should dig up this article fifty years hence – which seems a wild imagining, but one never knows; people may still be writing university theses, and pursuing what they will still call 'research' – he may pause in his ghoulish task and wonder what to make of...the term 'low-brow.'" Murdoch then goes on to define the "low-brow" as "not merely the stupid person, but the person who is content with his stupidity; not merely the ignoramus, but the person who glories in his ignorance. I mean the person who stares at the procession of life as a cow stares at a passing train; the person for whom material comfort means everything, and a high civilization nothing..." Walter Murdoch, "The Tyranny of the Low-Brow," *The Australian Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (March 1937): 40-47, quotations from 40, 41-42.

³⁶ "Corn of Plenty," *Newsweek* 33, June 13, 1949, 76-77.

³⁷ Gene Autry, for example, ended up with five stars on Hollywood Boulevard. He is the only person to have a star in each of the five categories: Motion Pictures, Recording, Radio, Television, and Theater.

Barn dances were at the intersection of confusion over modern America. The Great Depression saw faith in the democratic American Dream evaporate. Times were hard, and many people began to wonder if “progress” were to blame for all the chaos. It was no coincidence that tobacco companies and manufacturers of stomach-soothing medications were the ones most likely to underwrite the programs. Barn dances were supposed to be a palliative cigarette, or a collective Tums, for the beaten-down American people. “[The barn dance] has remained a portrait of the rustic heart of America tied to a perennially acid stomach,” wrote *Newsweek* about the *National Barn Dance* (sponsored by Alka-Seltzer) in 1943. The magazine further charged that the program was “probably the closest that radio will ever get to authentic Americana...an unvarnished if slightly sandpapered group of backwoods talent.”³⁸ Had something been lost? Was it worth saving? The barn dances offered opportunities to explore those questions.

Whereas “hillbilly” could be a pejorative term in Virginia just like anywhere else, it had a considerably less negative connotation than, say, in the midwestern newspapers lamenting the sudden arrival of thousands of rural migrants. For one thing, southerners had spent less time drawing distinctions between themselves and country folk than the people of New York City or Chicago had. The South was still predominantly rural at the outbreak of the Second World War, and farming was more a way of life than an occupational relic. The war, however, lured farm workers into the military or defense-related jobs, “spurring a

³⁸ “And That Is Hay,” *Newsweek*, May 3, 1943, 64, 66.

permanent downward trend in the relative numbers of rural Virginians.”³⁹ The former farm workers often found new lives in the state’s burgeoning urban centers, or established a pattern of moving back and forth between the two as opportunities presented themselves. By 1950, numbers of urban and rural Virginians were nearly equal.⁴⁰ And Virginians – manual laborers and wealthy businessmen, men and women, black and white – quickly became aware that the demographic upheaval meant “an older America of small farms and towns, stable family life, white over black, men over women, and worldly isolation was vanishing.”⁴¹

Hillbillies existed on Richmond’s stages, and rural migrants lived in Richmond’s neighborhoods, but neither were regularly presented as ridiculous caricatures. For one thing, the influx of rural-dwellers was critical for the city’s booming postwar economy.⁴² Richmond boosters had crowed about population growth as a sign of the city’s virility and potential, and now the city was exploding. Unlike long-time residents of Chicago or Detroit who described rural emigrants as exotic and possibly pathological relics of a bygone era, Richmonders were generally not hostile to the rural migrants. Marie Tyler-McGraw has argued that in the early twentieth century, “the rural migrant in the train station or on the docks at the James River, clutching bulging suitcase and the remains of a packed lunch, was the intermediary figure between the Old

³⁹ Peter Wallenstein, *Cradle of America: Four Centuries of Virginia History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 325.

⁴⁰ Ronald L. Heinemann, *et al.* *Old Dominion, New Commonwealth*, 326.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 325.

⁴² According to the 1950 census, Richmond’s population rose 19% from 1940 to 1950, seeing an increase of some 37,000 people. The surge was news-worthy enough to make the front page of the *Washington Post*. “Richmond Population up 19 Percent to 229,905,” *Washington Post*, June 21, 1950, 1.

South's rural values and the New South's urban vision."⁴³ Rhetorically, the conservative South persisted in believing that Americans' strongest values – hard work, individualism, faith, family loyalty – were forged through labor on the land. Unlike the waves of immigration that had fueled industrial growth in the Northeast, Richmond's rural newcomers were mostly Protestant and English-speaking. And thanks to Virginia's Racial Purity laws, they could be neatly classified as either "colored" or "white," at least on paper. If they did not adapt fully to city ways of life, the city could adapt to them. They were known quantities, and mostly welcome. Indeed, Tyler-McGraw claims the rural migrants "proved an invigorating infusion into the city's commerce and produced many of its innovative entrepreneurs and civic leaders in each generation."⁴⁴

Not only did Richmond readily absorb the rural emigrants that filled its tobacco plants and working-class neighborhoods, but the city also began to claim for itself some of the hillbilly culture the emigrants brought with them. Hillbilly records outsold all other types of music in Richmond in 1953, indicating that Richmonders preferred artists like Hank Williams to the crooning of Perry Como and Tony Bennett.⁴⁵ (Who wouldn't?) More than being commercially viable, however, the hillbilly icon became a rallying point for civic pride and self-definition. Virginians – both entertainers and fans – were at the forefront of a musical movement possibly for the first time in the history of the Commonwealth.

⁴³ Marie Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls: Richmond, Virginia, and Its People* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 218.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ "Country Music Was Big Here 40 Years Ago, Too," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Oct. 4, 1993, C3. Hank Williams was probably at least partially responsible for the surge in sales of recorded hillbilly music in 1953. The former star of the *Louisiana Hayride* had recorded "Your Cheatin' Heart," one of the most famous country music songs of all time, shortly before his death on Jan. 1, 1953. Sales sky-rocketed.

Lured by the promise of large crowds and box-office receipts, some of the best country music performers in the country passed through Richmond in the late 1940s and 1950s. The city soon earned a reputation for being a hillbilly hub, so much so that the city “was a strong contender for the billing that Nashville now is so proud of – ‘The Country Music Capital of the World.’”⁴⁶

WRVA had itself been somewhat of a hillbilly hub since its first days on the air. Commitment to spiritual and/or cultural “uplift” sent WRVA officials into the allegedly values-laden countryside in search of wholesome entertainment. Jokes about moonshine were forbidden, but sentimental ballads about courting or mothers matched the goals of WRVA’s mission statement perfectly.⁴⁷

Additionally, perhaps because of Virginians’ continued connections with rural ways of life, or sensitivity to any insinuations of [white] southern backwardness, WRVA depicted the hillbilly as a role model. Many of the white men who made programming decisions at WRVA had grown up on farms themselves, or were involved in buying rural property. The same was true of their listeners. WRVA’s “hillbillies,” on the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* and elsewhere, were not ignorant bumpkins but guardians of tradition and morality. The emphasis was not on their lack of street savvy, but on their common horse sense, born of hard work and experience.

WRVA had had “hillbilly culture” on the dial for some time by the Second World War. Arguably, the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*’s reliance on white, itinerant

⁴⁶ Norman Rowe, “A Thorough Look at Hillbilly World,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Oct. 26, 1969, F6.

⁴⁷ Variety Showmanship Questionnaire, 1939, LVA: WRVA Radio. “Since Virginia is largely a temperate state, it is the policy of WRVA not to accept advertising of alcoholic beverages of any sort. We have been lauded for this policy by many resolutions passed by various organizations.”

musicians in the 1920s and early 1930s had been a part of the hillbilly movement that reached prominence via the *National Barn Dance*. Even after NBC dropped the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* in 1934, WRVA kept hillbillies in the local line-up, primarily as ambassadors of “old-time” religion.⁴⁸ Self-described hillbillies greeted listeners with prayers and music for the first hour of WRVA morning broadcasting on the *Hillbilly Jamboree* at least as early as 1942. Religion was an important component of WRVA’s broadcasting in general, but the hillbilly programming in particular. The prayers on *Hillbilly Jamboree* were followed by another hour of prayers on *Morning Hymnal*. On weekends, WRVA’s highly touted church service programming included a whole series on “Rural Church Services.”⁴⁹ The Workmans, who ultimately pulled together the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, were doing a program called *Church Across the Way* on WRVA at least as early as 1948. Perhaps the best example of the entwined commitment to hillbilly and religious programming was WRVA’s Sunday night-time line-up, which began with *The Night Pastor Program* at 11PM and continued with an all-night hillbilly round-up. Public Relations director Walter Bishop noted in a letter to WRVA’s “night pastor,” Rev. A. Purnell Bailey of Richmond’s Centenary Methodist Church, that “every Sunday night after you go off the air at midnight the calls continue to come from people asking your advice.”⁵⁰ Presumably they

⁴⁸ Clipping, *Broadcasting*, Nov. 15, 1935, LVA Lucy Family Papers.

⁴⁹ “Rural Churches – History, etc,” UVA: WRVA Radio. Interestingly, WRVA officials did not have to travel far outside Richmond before they encountered churches they considered to be rural. Services originated from Highland Springs, Cold Harbor, and Chesterfield County, among others. All are within 10 miles of the city limits.

⁵⁰ Rev. Bailey was WRVA’s “night pastor” for many years. In a 1955 on-air interview, he told public relations director Walter Bishop that he had been amazed by the scope of the show’s listenership: “We have received long-distance calls on the program from Ohio, West Virginia, mail from various cities and towns of Virginia, of Indiana, Maryland, Illinois, Michigan, Iowa,

pondered their problems and dialed the phone while listening to the twang and guitar strings of hillbilly performers.

WRVA did well with these early hillbilly offerings, but the programming line-up of the mid-1940s still closely resembled the polyglot of sounds and stories that had so thrilled Americans in the early days of mass broadcasting. As always, WRVA officials balanced local programs with nationally syndicated programs, and the local programs were more likely to be news shows than anything else. The hillbilly fare was popular, but not WRVA's bread and butter. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, WRVA officials made a conscious decision to invest heavily in hillbilly programs. Anxious about maintaining a large audience amid new pressure from competition, officials "whitewashed" the dial.⁵¹ Network radio, of which WRVA had enthusiastically been a part until its dramatic postwar decline, celebrated the diverse sounds of Jews, Chicagoans, black jazz musicians, and New Yorkers. Deserted by network radio, however, WRVA turned away from the eclectic network line-up while searching for an identity as a mostly local radio station. They settled upon white southerners – as a mostly undifferentiated bloc – as both featured performers and a target audience. The

Pennsylvania." CD-197: "A Determined Purpose: WRVA 30th Anniversary Special," Nov. 4, 1955, LVA: WRVA Radio. Not all listeners were pleased with WRVA's decision to broadcast hillbilly all night long. One listener complained to local music critic Norman Rowe that WRVA's *All-Night Record Round-Up* contained too much hillbilly. Rowe conceded that perhaps hillbilly music should not "be cultivated as a major crop in the wee hours of the morning." Interestingly, Rowe recommended replacing some of the hillbilly music with jazz. "If you're going to farm out your musical platters 'down where the South begins,' don't sell the Southland short on jazz. That's where it first bloomed successfully, you know." Norman Rowe, "Listen-----with Rowe" [column] *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 13, 1949, D10.

⁵¹ I have used the term "whitewash" to describe the gradual decrease in programming featuring anyone other than white southerners. While WRVA moved away from the broad parameters of network broadcasting, however, they did not entirely erase ethnic or racial difference from the line-up. Local African Americans continued to be part of the station's live entertainment, mostly as gospel singers.

decision was not surprising, given that the vast majority of WRVA employees and a presumed majority of its listeners were white southerners, but the shift nevertheless altered WRVA's position in the community, with some unforeseen consequences.

The *Old Dominion Barn Dance* was the capstone of new broadcasting initiatives at the station. In the spring of 1946, officials saw their share of listeners decline, especially in the afternoons. "Therefore," the station's history of the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* reads, "it was decided to lump all of our hillbilly units into one group and schedule them in the afternoon opposite the competition's strongest rated [afternoon soap operas]."⁵² And so the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* was born, with Mary Higdon Workman acting as the "Femcee."⁵³ The show's initial success, along with additional market research, "convinced us that time was ripe for a big hillbilly operation."⁵⁴

By 1951, a WRVA sales pamphlet was crowing that this "radical departure from our previous programming policies" had been an excellent business decision.⁵⁵ But why? Previously, WRVA officials had assured themselves repeatedly that *balance* was the path to success – that the station had to balance local and national tastes, rural and urban tastes. Why abandon the emphasis on balance that had been partly responsible for WRVA's dominance in the mid-Atlantic? Descriptions such as "Hillbilly Capital of the World" and "Down Where

⁵² *Old Dominion Barn Dance* Scrapbook, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁵³ The term "Femcee" referred to Mary Workman's position as a Master of Ceremonies or "M.C." on the barn dance. Because she was the only woman at the time to hold the position of M.C. for a radio barn dance, WRVA highlighted that fact by referring to her as a "Femcee."

⁵⁴ WRVA Sales Pamphlet, ca. 1951, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

the South Begins” did not evoke compatible images for WRVA. Was the station selling images of the “old” South, or was it the gateway to a newer, more modern (and profitable) South? Could it be both? In a seemingly paradoxical move, WRVA officials felt they had to invest heavily in “tradition” – via the hillbilly – in order to keep pace with the present and future.

Much of the impetus for the programming change was a direct result of a new set of challenges to radio broadcasters in the postwar period, chief among them being the advent of television.⁵⁶ The technology that made television possible had been around as early as the late 1930s, but the Second World War had directed manufacturing elsewhere and it was not until the late 1940s that Americans became familiar with it. By 1956, two-thirds of American homes had televisions, and the top three radio networks had all successfully launched television broadcasting businesses that were leaving the older technology (and its profits) in the dust.⁵⁷ At the end of the war, no one was sure how television would reinvent mass media, but almost everyone agreed that it would. Television “stole” familiar radio programs, providing viewers with a chance to see as well as hear the characters and stories they had followed for years.⁵⁸ Losing audience share amid the redundancy, radio stations scrambled to provide

⁵⁶ Ultimately, FM radio would also challenge the dominance of AM broadcasting, but not until well into the 1960s and 1970s. WRVA purchased licenses for two FM stations in 1948. “WRVA Milestones,” LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁵⁷ Gomery, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 107-110.

⁵⁸ To take one example, popular comedian Jack Benny’s radio ratings fell precipitously in the early 1950s even as his television ratings skyrocketed.

different programs. By the mid-1950s, radio was no longer the dominant mass medium. The so-called Golden Age of radio was over.⁵⁹

The 1950s were dark days for radio broadcasting, and a certain despondency pervades WRVA's sales memos and meeting notes. "Any realistic consideration of the future must take into account that WRVA will have vastly decreased audience," began one 1951 memo, "almost certainly when more TV services are available, quite possibly before that time."⁶⁰ Employees who considered themselves broadcasting pioneers – such as Calvin Lucy, Bertha Hewlett, and Walter Bishop – suddenly found themselves struggling to keep pace with newer, more modern technologies and business models. Twenty years earlier, they had been the brash upstarts reshaping American culture with their radial antenna. Now they had become "old" in the field, had fallen behind, and – most distressing of all – could no longer insure continued profitability.

Despite the premature obituaries for radio broadcasting, station operators persevered.⁶¹ Their challenge was to identify a target audience and specialize in cultivating its loyalty. For many station owners, this meant capitalizing on the

⁵⁹ While radio quickly lost ground as America's preeminent peddler of a national culture, it did not disappear. After early attempts to save their radio networks, the heads of CBS and NBC ultimately "left their radio stations to adjust to localism" while they concentrated on "their new cash cows." Variety shows, soap operas, and sit-coms all but disappeared from radio by 1960. Local stations increasingly relied on music and news to attract listeners and advertisers, rather than the relatively diverse fare of the 1930s and 1940s. Gomery, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 143.

⁶⁰ "Advertising, Mail Order – Plan of Future Development, Mar. 1951," LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁶¹ "Radio is still here," Donald Costello wrote in 1959. "It has been resurrected from its own ashes; but not as a phoenix – more like a cinder." For most of the decade, trade journals were full of articles predicting, lamenting, or otherwise anticipating the demise of radio. Its continued survival did nothing to dispel the entrenched narrative that television would "kill" radio. Even as he maligned post-television radio broadcasting, Costello conceded "But the mass media tend to plod along, muddling through, adapting themselves accidentally, rather than with foresight, to the changing times." In many ways, this is exactly what happened. Donald P. Costello, "What Ever Happened to Radio?" *The Commonwealth* 69 (Jan. 9, 1959): 381-382. Quotes from 382.

new portability and personalization of radio listening. The television had become the centerpiece of the living room by the mid-1950s, but radios had moved into cars and bedrooms. The new trick to radio broadcasting was in appealing to individual listeners rather than the whole family, and above all to commuters and teenagers. Commuter time became a prime news hour, and radio stations increasingly relied on pop music to attract America's youth and the advertisers that followed along behind them. After two decades of creating a mass culture, radio was now specializing in niche audiences.

Like other AM radio broadcasters, WRVA culled its offerings to appeal to a particular demographic. Unlike most other radio stations, however, WRVA avoided the kind of popular music made famous by the Top 40 format that emerged mid-decade. With the Top 40 Format, listeners tuned in to hear a sound rather than a program, revolutionizing listenership patterns and advertising sales.⁶² WRVA officials did not experiment with the Top 40, and in fact occasionally showed hostility toward it, but they did employ a variation of the strategy. They seemed to have felt their greatest chance of success lay in white Virginians with an affinity for rural life rather than any other single group. In the chaos of the Television Era, WRVA chose hillbillies over rock 'n' roll, Sunshine Sue over Elvis, country music over rhythm and blues.⁶³ There were many

⁶² Industry analysts of the early to mid-1950s realized that lengthy music programs could attract and keep a large audience, with advertisers paying to have "plugs" every few minutes across the day as opposed to sponsoring one program. As Douglas Gormey explains, while network radio "had emphasized discontinuity, with shows every half-hour, Top 40 radio...was built on continuity." Gormey, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 148-151, quotation on 149.

⁶³ A note on my nomenclature. In the postwar period, the music industry attempted to retire the term "hillbilly" in favor of "country music," a more polite term without baggage. At the same time, "race records" became "rhythm and blues." Again, the music industry was trying to broaden the appeal of the music beyond its African American base. *Ibid.*, 151-155.

reasons for this decision, among them practical financial concerns. But the station's conversion from a proud network affiliate bringing the rest of the world into Virginia, into a self-consciously local station taking Virginians, white southerners, and rural people into their past was more than a reaction to a difficult business climate. WRVA operators were in some sense charting a course for Virginia's future: what values should Virginians or [white] southerners or Americans adopt in the chaotic postwar era?

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WRVA had always touted itself as a friend to the farmer, but in the postwar period the station rededicated itself not only to farmers, but also to celebrating the farming way of life. In 1955, WRVA commissioned a survey through the Virginia Department of Agriculture to study the listening habits of farmers, ostensibly because the broadcasters were hoping to keep an iron grip on that sector amid the television assault. The survey found that 42% of all farmers did not have a television set; and only 66 respondents out of 1,639 said they got market news from the television. A plurality got market news from local newspapers, while 38% mentioned the radio as their primary source.⁶⁴ If WRVA was going to survive by cultivating a "local" audience, this was a likely, if not large, target population.

Farmers were potentially valuable to WRVA not only because they did not watch much television and they trusted radio, but because their programming preferences aligned well with WRVA's stated policies and the personal preferences of station officials. Generally speaking, rural people wanted "clean"

⁶⁴ The *Virginia Farmer and Market News*, Sept. 1955, LVA: WRVA Radio.

entertainment. A 1948 *Radio and Television News* article reported on the efforts of New York farmers who were frustrated with “city stations” for not accommodating their tastes. They wanted regular weather updates, quality entertainment during the lunch hours, and more “Hawaiian music.” They designed their own “Rural Radio Network,” and produced shows which *Radio and Television News* described as “fine music and straight reading of carefully-selected stories, in place of soap operas.”⁶⁵ WRVA had had similar programs since 1925, so on the surface it made sense for WRVA to narrow its programming to serve one of its most reliable bases.⁶⁶

Courting farmers made logical sense, but it is doubtful that it would have made financial sense, if not for additional factors. Increasingly, WRVA's revenue relied on local advertising rather than network ad sales.⁶⁷ When WRVA celebrated “farmers,” they were really appealing to people who, for one reason or another, wanted to believe that a rural way of life was superior to life in American cities and suburbs. When they touted themselves as the farmer's best friend, WRVA officials were speaking not only to farmers, but to the legions of Virginians who maintained that the countryside was the origin and treasury of core values.

⁶⁵ The New York farmers created the Rural Radio Network, a series of low-power, unmanned stations, “to give farmers information and entertainment they want when they want it.” “Radio Network for Rural Areas,” *Radio & Television News* 40 (Dec. 1948): 64-65, 144-146.

⁶⁶ H.C. Cline, a “farmer and homespun philosopher” better known as “The Farmer's Friend,” was one of WRVA's most popular features from 1925 until his sudden death in 1939. Walter R. Bishop, *WRVA Radio, 35 Years* (Richmond, VA: [WRVA radio?], 1960).

⁶⁷ Between 1950 and 1960, revenue from local advertising on radio rose from \$203.2 million to \$385.3 million, an increase of 90%. According to the FCC, local ads “accounted for nearly two-thirds of every radio ad dollar as against a third in 1945. Local advertising was the main reason AM stations were able to turn a profit in 1960, despite the harrowing introduction of television broadcasting. See Gomery, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 105.

Many of the new suburbanites had grown up on farms, after all, and were susceptible to the pull of nostalgia.

Even more broadly, the image of rural life that WRVA created for its listeners in the 1950s soothed white anxieties by reinforcing gender and racial norms from the pre-war era, all under the guise of “tradition.” As the final chapter, “Civil Rights on the Air,” explores in depth, WRVA officials themselves were confused and sometimes angered by the scope of postwar social change. Perhaps “whitewashing” seemed like a simplification that on its surface was racial, but was really about controlling many, many different people attempting to transform Virginia’s social and political landscape. The hillbilly line-up itself might not have been reactionary, but when compared to the type of programming WRVA had used earlier, it certainly spent more time focused on the past than the exciting pace of change in the present. The *Old Dominion Barn Dance* was produced from the core of this anxiety. The program was ostensibly set in the past, and made much of *returning*: to family, to the home, to the countryside, to the heart of America.

*

“Now everybody get real comfortable, kick off your shoes, you know, dance in the aisles. And who knows? You might get lucky and get a better pair when you go home.”⁶⁸ So began the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, arguably WRVA’s most successful program of all time. The hillbilly show began running on March 25, 1946, and quickly became Richmond’s, and perhaps Virginia’s, premier location for rural rhythms and old-time humor. “Femcee” Mary Higdon

⁶⁸ Virginia (Ginger) Workman Stanley, interview by Caroline Morris, March 11, 2010.

Workman, better known to listeners as Sunshine Sue, directed and produced the show for eleven years, which broadcast live early on weekday mornings, during the afternoon, and before a live theatre audience on Saturday nights. During its tenure, the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* became a “mecca” for country music, in the words of one reporter, attracting performers from all over the country and broadcasting the cast’s antics all over Virginia, the nation, and eventually all over the world via the Armed Forces Radio Service before going off the air on July 31, 1957.⁶⁹

Given that the barn dance was a well-established broadcasting model by 1946, the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* was “a relative latecomer,” in the words of historian Wayne Daniels.⁷⁰ WRVA had always touted a commitment to farmers specifically, and had generally championed values that were more closely associated with the countryside than the teeming cities, so it was a good fit for a barn dance program. But in the end, the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* was considerably less a product of the rural past than an expression of the upheaval of the urban South in the 1950s.

From wire to wire, Mary Higdon Workman worked hard to craft an image of the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* that was uplifting, wholesome, lively, and professional. Workman was the person to whom WRVA turned when they wanted to remake their station as a hillbilly stronghold. Her vision of a radio barn dance became WRVA’s vision, and her success was WRVA’s success. During

⁶⁹ Cindy Creasy, “Revived Barn Dance attracts old, new fans,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 14, 1991, E1, E9.

⁷⁰ Wayne W. Daniels, “Times Ain’t Like They Used to Be: KY Pioneer Country Musician Curley Collins Remembered.” *Bluegrass Unlimited* vol. 37, no. 2 (Aug. 2002): 66-72.

its eleven years on the air, the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* brought the voices of The Carter Family, Grandpa Jones, and Joe and Rose Maphis to listeners, and launched the careers of many others. Workman, the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* performers, and WRVA officials all worked together to create a barn dance that had regional flavor, but that would also appeal to a national and eventually international audience. They also worked to provide a specific sort of escape: to the countryside, to the past, to the familiar, all of which were heavily romanticized. The overwhelming popularity of the program is a testimony to how well they connected with their audience.

The *Old Dominion Barn Dance* itself was fairly standard. Mary Workman and her husband John drew on their experiences with the *National Barn Dance* in Chicago and *The Midwestern Hayride* in Cincinnati in the 1930s, as well as their early “hillbilly” work for WRVA. They put together a variety show that featured a regular cast spruced up by guest musicians from time to time. Workman chose a theme for each show, and performers alternated musical acts – generally country or gospel music – with comedic skits of their own choice. Workman claimed the show was “highly produced,” but intentionally unscripted. She thought a “stilted, formalized atmosphere” would ruin it.⁷¹ Journalist Margaret Brown agreed, describing the overall effect as being “loose at the joints but amiably adaptable – a sort of theatrical Raggedy Ann.”⁷²

Everything from the set to the on-stage banter was supposed to help you escape back to a familiar (and mythic) domestic setting. The show opened with

⁷¹ Margaret Brown, “The Queen of the Hillbillies,” *The Commonwealth* 17, no. 3 (March 1950): 12-13, 34-35.

⁷² Ibid.

Sunshine Sue encouraging everyone to take off their shoes and get comfortable, and from that point forward the audience and the performers were supposed to be one family, having a good time in the intimate space of a home (or barn).⁷³ “Minutes before showtime, fans filed in. Amid a low rumble of popcorn crunching and chitchat, the Lyric Theater’s big red curtain parted. Hush fell, then applause.”⁷⁴ On the stage stood Sunshine Sue at the main microphone, surrounded by a semi-circle of hay bales. Men in bib overalls and women in colorful gingham dresses sat on the bales and moved with the music; the audience was encouraged to move along with them.⁷⁵ Whether you were watching the performance or listening at home, you were supposed to feel transported – away from your seat, your house, your city, and maybe even your time. Perhaps more accurately, you were supposed to feel *transported back* to something. For an hour or two, you were returning to or revisiting something that was either “lost” or slipping away.

The cast members were all white, and sang the music of Appalachia and the American West.⁷⁶ Long-time performer Mac Wiseman described the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* as a “variety show. We’d do the latest country songs, but

⁷³ Listeners, of course, could not see the stage at the Lyric Theatre, but the 1,300 people in the live audience could, and both performers and marketing materials described it regularly. WRVA had signed a lease with the Life Insurance Company of Virginia in 1946, who had a building standing just a hair up the hill from the Capitol, specifically so they could begin broadcasting the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* in front of a large, formal audience. Rates were 95 cents for a reserved seat, 65 cents general admission for adults, and 40 or 45 cents general admission for children. Clipping, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Oct. 18, 1947, Curley Collins Collection, 1928-2009, Personal Papers Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Hereafter cited as LVA: Curley Collins Collection.

⁷⁴ One-time barn dance performer Ramona Jones, speaking about the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* in 2001. Tom Netherland, “Heyday: Sunshine Sue, Strategic Straw, and Hillbilly Songs Aplenty,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, May 27, 2001, : H1, H2.

⁷⁵ Norman Rowe, “Morgan Continues Family Tradition,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 21, 1991, M9.

⁷⁶ One critical difference between the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* and the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* is that the *Barn Dance* did not include blackface or Negro gospel singers

also standards, old ballads, dance tunes, novelty tunes, [and] gospel music.”⁷⁷

Anything that harkened back to tradition, the land, and family. When asked in 1953 why “country-style music” had become so popular in urban communities, Mary Workman replied:

There’s a growing yearning to get back to unpaved soil and uncomplicated living...Our kind of music is so simple, soothing, reassuring, direct, that people just can’t seem to do without it any more. People have the feeling that it belongs to them because basically it’s still pickin’ and singin’, and that brings it close to home for most of us.⁷⁸

Such a description of country or hillbilly music was fairly standard, though it did take on new meaning in the postwar period. For one thing, many of WRVA’s listeners probably were people who had moved from “unpaved soil” to urban areas. Many others were only a generation or so removed from farms. Still others may have simply felt helpless under the shadow cast by the atomic bomb, which could be seen as the nightmare scenario of “progress” and “civilization.” Country or hillbilly music seemed to offer an alternative to those changes, or erase them altogether, and might therefore have been appealing.

Or maybe Workman’s love of country music had nothing to do with geopolitics and urban migration. Maybe she just hated rock ‘n’ roll. Other WRVA officials certainly did. By the mid-1950s, a young white man named Elvis Presley was making waves by combining the music of black and white southerners with new urban sounds he heard in Memphis.⁷⁹ When he came to Richmond, though,

⁷⁷ Clark Bustard, “Barn Dance Revival,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 7, 1991, K1, K10.

⁷⁸ C.E. Butterfield, “Network Radio Show Makes ‘Sue’ a National Personality” *Richmond News Leader*, April 23, 1953, 56.

⁷⁹ According to historian Pete Daniel, Elvis Presley “personified, or at least suggested, the shady side of Southern life.” Daniel agrees with Tom Wolfe that “even before he was on television, he simply sounded, in that pasteurized time, *dirty* – outlaw, wild.” A critical factor in his reception as “wild” or an “outlaw” was his method of blending sounds of blackness and sounds of whiteness.

to perform on the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, Sunshine Sue showed him the door. Her daughter Ginger Stanley recalled:

I mean, he got up there and did what he had been doing wherever he had been for the couple of years he'd been travelling the country and started gyrating and you know she paid him for those shows and she got [unintelligible] here's what we agreed to, but we don't want you to come back on.⁸⁰

The music performed by the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* crew was not just about shoring up the demographic and geopolitical changes wrought by the Second World War, but also about holding back or containing the cultural transformations that were building steam in postwar America.

To reinforce the image of "wholesomeness" that she hoped to cultivate for the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, Workman insisted on good behavior from her cast. With a talent budget of about \$1000 a week, Workman could hire between 17 and 20 musicians from the barn dance circuit for each show.⁸¹ The performers got paid \$55 a week for radio time, then \$10 each show they worked on Saturday.⁸² Though it was a good paycheck and probably seemed like a princely sum to some of the itinerant musicians, it was not a huge amount of money. The modest salary meant that the musicians remained part of the working class, which suited the image of the "common man" that barn dances in general celebrated. But Workman's performers *did* have to avoid some of the

Presley borrowed liberally from white rural musical traditions as well as black musical traditions, and pioneered a new sound altogether that defied neat, racial categorizations. "If Elvis was the King of Rock 'n' Roll," writes Daniel, "he was the white king. His music dissolved racial barriers both among performers and among listeners." Pete Daniel, *Standing at the Crossroads: Southern Life in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 182.

⁸⁰ Virginia Workman Stanley, interview by Caroline Morris, March 11, 2010.

⁸¹ Barn Dance History, Jan. 6, 1948, Scrapbook, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁸² Tom Netherland, "Heyday: Sunshine Sue, Strategic Straw, and Hillbilly Songs Aplenty," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, May 27, 2001, H1, H2.

“rougher” behaviors associated with the working class, such as drinking and swearing. At the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, like other barn dances, Workman required cast members to be sober and professional. Her concern for her cast's respectability could have stemmed from personal convictions, from a shrewd business sense, or both. The last of seven children “of farm folk” in Iowa,⁸³ Mary Workman had been raised in a household where hard work was a religion unto itself; she may have extended her personal work ethic to her cast, which left no room for shenanigans. But personal convictions aside, Workman had a vested interest in maintaining the respectability of her barn dance for professional reasons. The cast of the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* became representative of the white working class in mid-century Virginia, and either intuitively or deliberately, Mary Workman used the radio show to elevate white, working-class culture.

The *Old Dominion Barn Dance* showcased a group of people on a farm surrounded by friends and family, singing old songs about carefully chaperoned love and hard work. On the surface, the *Old Dominion Barn Dance's* hillbilly sound was not all that different from the *Four Deuces*, or even the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*. All three programs featured performers singing old ballads with a hillbilly twang, and telling corny-but-clean jokes. But the musicians of the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, although referred to as “hillbillies,” were not performing as yokels or rubes, but as dignified, working, white men and women. Unlike the “hillbillies” on the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* or the *Four Deuces* who made fun of themselves, the

⁸³ *Hayride* Playbill, UVA: WRVA Radio.

cast of the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* was valorizing the image of rural, white, working folks.

On an average fifteen-minute show, the performers would play four or five songs, which were often selected by listener request. “Lot of folks asking for a lot of old-timers that we’re digging up,” Sunshine Sue told the audience in 1954.⁸⁴ The “old-timers” that Sunshine Sue and the gang sang on that broadcast included “Darby’s Ram,” an instrumental accordion piece called “Robert E. Lee,” “An Old Love Affair,” “There’s Pins and Needles in My Heart,” and a “sacred song” entitled “Where Could I Go?”⁸⁵ “Darby’s Ram” was a nonsense piece sung by Grandpa Jones about “granddad’s big ol’ sheep” that had a horn that reached to the moon. “An Old Love Affair” was a lament for a lost lover, and “There’s Pins and Needles in My Heart” mourned the absence of a lover who had just up and walked away. “Where Could I Go?” was an old hymn asking “Where could I go oh where could I go/ Seeking a refuge for my soul/ Needing a friend to save me in the end/ Where could I go but to the Lord?”⁸⁶ The songs that listeners had requested emphasized farm humor, unrequited or lonely love, a Confederate general, and Christian salvation. Over the space of fifteen minutes, the music had spun a narrative of pastoralism, romance, the “Old South,” and faith in Jesus. And by building programs around requests, she assigned value to the preferences of listeners who wanted to hear sounds of that narrative.

⁸⁴ CD-133: *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, Karo Corn Products Program, Jan. 29, 1954, LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid. As a matter of interest, Elvis Presley recorded a version of “Where Could I Go?” at around the same time that he would perform many times in his career.

Between sets, she joked around with the cast, but not with the raucous, earthy humor of the early WRVA hillbilly programming. "Mandolin, guitar, bass fiddles, accordions, they's flyin' all over the studio," Sunshine Sue giggled into the microphone, as she announced two of the performers for the 1954 broadcast. Earlier in the show, she had promised to sing one of the songs "if I can get three or four or five handsome gentlemen to help me a little."⁸⁷ Unlike the relationship between Bob Beadles and the performers of the *Corn Cob Pipe Club*, Sunshine Sue was lightly teasing and flirting with her cast instead of bantering with endmen. She could do this partly because she was a woman, and listeners expected women broadcasters to provide more warmth than male broadcasters.⁸⁸ Mary Workman needed to make the audience *like* her as well as be entertained by her, and amiable chatter was one way to do this.

More importantly, however, Sunshine Sue could interact playfully and flirtatiously with her cast because their show was not closely tied to the minstrel format like the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* had been in the 1920s and 1930s. The *Old Dominion Barn Dance* did not have blackface characters or "endmen" whose job was to needle the "straight man," or M.C., so she did not have to assume the role of the witty but condescending interlocutor. The show had no black musicians,

⁸⁷ CD-133: *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, Karo Corn Products Program, Jan. 29, 1954, LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁸⁸ Journalist Margaret Banning made the case in 1947 that mixed-gender audiences were more accepting of a "woman broadcaster" than they had been a decade earlier. Banning saw the inclusion of women in radio broadcasting as a necessary step in furthering the goals of democracy. "I have heard the old cliché that 'no woman's voice is any good on the air,'" she wrote, "and seen it disproved by men who listen to women broadcasters because of the calmness and melody of their voices." She went on to exhort women broadcasters "to adopt friendly, personal contact with the listening public" in the hopes that women could connect with members of the audience in ways that men could not. Margaret Culkin Banning, "Looking Ahead with the Woman Broadcaster," *Independent Woman* 26 (May 1947): 127, 147.

either. Although the barn dance was a variety show with roots in vaudeville, it was not an *explicit* performance of racialized sounds and movements, and it avoided sounds of blackness in particular. Because WRVA's barn dance was all-white, Mary Workman/Sunshine Sue could gently flirt and tease her performers in ways that would have been inconceivable in the late 1940s and early 1950s had she presided over an interracial cast, or even a cast that included white men in blackface. Even though white hysteria about interracial sex between white women and black men had subsided somewhat in the postwar period, the specter of such a romance was still utterly taboo.⁸⁹ By distancing the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* from the minstrel tradition, and by elevating the tone and content of the program, Workman presented hillbilly music as considerably more respectable and dignified than WRVA's early hillbilly programming.

The music Workman chose for the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* was significant not only because of the narratives of rural harmony, love, and abiding faith that it suggested, but also because the barn dance music stood in stark contrast to the emerging genre of "rockabilly" music. "Rockabilly" was a hybrid of country music, bluegrass, rhythm and blues, and honky-tonk music that burst on the scene between 1953 and 1955. The genre came out of postwar southern cities where the music of blacks and whites, many of whom were recent migrants – mingled with the sounds of the city. By the mid-1950s, a number of white rockabilly artists, some of whom were covering songs first performed by black

⁸⁹ For a detailed history of white hysteria over interracial sex between white women and black men, as well as black protests against that hysteria, please see Lisa Dorr, *White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race in Virginia*. In particular, see chapter 7, "Another Negro-Did-It-Crime: Interracial Rape after World War II."

musicians, landed record deals that facilitated the distribution of the new sound far and wide. Buddy Holly, Bill Haley and the Comets, Hank Williams, and especially Elvis Presley all contributed to the new genre, infusing country music with rhythm and blues. On stage, rockabilly musicians seemed “possessed by rhythm and raw emotion, flailing their arms, legs, head, and hair, these unforgettable wildmen fed off the energy returned from amazed audiences entranced by the frenzied spectacle.”⁹⁰ The lyrics also packed an emotional wallop, exploring topics such as illicit love, rebellion, death, and the empowerment of America’s youth. Unlike the hillbilly music on the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, rockabilly did not give a damn about “respectability.”⁹¹ Mary Workman had no interest in incorporating rockabilly influences into her act. Whereas rockabilly – and later its successor rock ‘n’ roll – were about fusion, co-optation, and borrowing, the atmosphere that she and the cast worked so hard to create presented an idealized image of “pure” American life, where God, love, and the land played primary roles. They were participants in the search for authenticity, using folk songs and overalls to lay a claim to some sort of common [white] American identity. They could not pollute the quest with the “bad” behaviors people associated with the term “hillbilly” or “rockabilly” if they hoped to succeed.

On the *Barn Dance*, common people were kings and queens. Part of Workman’s aversion to swearing and sexual innuendo was no doubt related to

⁹⁰ Craig Morrison, *Go, Cat, Go!: Rockabilly Music and Its Makers* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 42.

⁹¹ There were no mainstream female rockabilly artists in the 1950s. While white men could get away with the raw sexuality of rockabilly stage performances, as well as the suggestive lyrics, it seems that white women could not.

the barn dance's overall mission of celebrating the dignity of a livelihood that required manual labor, whether on a farm or in a city. Mary Workman would go to battle in order to protect the respectability of the program. When barn dance regular Curley Collins was mistakenly arrested outside of the Hotel Richmond in 1946 – police were looking for a robbery suspect and insisted he looked shifty – Mary Workman threatened a lawsuit to prevent the newspapers from printing his name.⁹² The false charges were anything but funny to Workman, Collins, and WRVA, and could have ended Collins's career and cast aspersions on the character of the barn dance. On more than one occasion, Workman also held the line against an unruly musician. Her daughter Gingery Stanley recalled her mother doing damage control backstage during performances: "She'd be the one walking around the block in her heels with a flower in her hair, getting [the occasional drunk performer] to the point where they could go onstage."⁹³ And if showing up drunk became a habit, Workman would release the musician. Mary Workman's brother-in-law George, who had been a part of the travelling group from its earliest days, "started not showing up on time and not looking neat, clean. And she realized there was a drinking problem, she worked with him as best she could, but she was the one to say: you can't continue on with the show."⁹⁴ The decision was a hard one, and Stanley describes her mother's reasoning:

⁹² "Fiddler with Hand in Pocket Hits Sour Note with Police," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 21, 1946. See also handwritten note on back of article. LVA: Curley Collins Collection.

⁹³ Tom Netherland, "Heyday: Sunshine Sue, Strategic Straw, and Hillbilly Songs Aplenty," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, May 27, 2001, H1, H2.

⁹⁴ Virginia (Ginger) Workman Stanley, interview by Caroline Morris, March 11, 2010.

There were years where Mom wasn't welcome to come back to Iowa because she had literally kicked one of the brothers [right] out. And that was very tough, but one of the things that was most important to my mother was that the show maintain a family atmosphere. They always ended with gospel music and so if anything felt, in her mind, that was detrimental to that atmosphere, then she would tolerate it because she had a lot of patience. My mother was the most patient woman you'd ever meet, but when she got to that point, that was it.⁹⁵

Mary Workman believed that respectability was the key to success for the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, and her definition of "respectability" required sobriety, good manners, clean humor, hymns, and old-time music.

Workman's instincts proved to be shrewd; the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* quickly became WRVA's most successful program in the post-network era. The Saturday evening programs proved to be such a popular addition to the afternoon show, and "business and ratings got so good (opposite the soapers)" that WRVA added another hour-long program every morning. Advertisers were lining up for the program, including Ivory Soap, Birdseye, Rumford, Chase & Sanborn, Duff's Mix, Stanback, Kellogg, Shelvador, Cavalier Cigarettes, Snowdrift, Vel, Scott's Emulsion, and more.⁹⁶ The mix of regional and national advertisers righted the ship for WRVA's Sales department, and proved that WRVA could stay afloat without revenue from network advertising. By the end of the show's first year on the air, WRVA officials professed to be "rightfully proud of the 'Old Dominion Barn Dance.'" It has given us a tremendous listener response in both ratings and revenue. It has also brought to the station considerable free

⁹⁵ Virginia (Ginger) Workman Stanley, interview by Caroline Morris, March 11, 2010.

⁹⁶ Also, Broad Candy Co., Bailey's Coffee, Imdrin, and Dr. LeGear Medicines. "Sales Promotion Packets, n.d.," LVA: WRVA Radio.

publicity and promotion from other sections of the country. What more can a station ask of a program?"⁹⁷

Of course, the advertisers would not have touched the show with a ten-foot pole if WRVA had not demonstrated that lots of people (and consumers) were listening in, which WRVA was happy to do. The station's official history of the program asserted that the first Saturday night broadcasts in Fall 1946 had "an enthusiastic audience of one hundred fifty thousand people."⁹⁸ Over its first three years of operation, the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* went from being a WRVA exclusive to a program heard across a regional network, to a "CBS commercial."⁹⁹ And the fans kept coming. In just three years, the show had played to 368,189 paid admissions, an average of half of Richmond's population each year, with the 95-cent top admission as possibly the highest in the country for a radio barn dance.¹⁰⁰ No one was a more enthusiastic fan of the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* than Governor William Tuck, who had a thing for Sunshine Sue and regularly made the short walk from the Governor's Mansion to the Lyric Theatre to watch the show.¹⁰¹

The radio listenership ratings continued to soar through the early 1950s. Within a year or two of operations, the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* 9:00 AM program had become the area's dominant morning show.¹⁰² In the Fall and Winter of 1950, a Hooper Rating survey commissioned by WRVA found that the

⁹⁷ Barn Dance History, Jan. 6, 1948, Scrapbook, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ "Sales Promotion Packets, n.d." [1949 or 1950], LVA: WRVA Radio.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Much more on him and the significance of his endorsement in the next chapter.

¹⁰² Barn Dance History, Jan. 6, 1948, Scrapbook, UVA: WRVA Radio. Advertisers paid good money for a morning show because women – the listeners most likely to be consumers of the products advertised on the radio – made up the greatest share of the audience.

Old Dominion Barn Dance was outpacing the most popular network shows on the dial, including *Fibber McGee* and *Bob Hope*.¹⁰³ CBS executive Bill Paley had left his radio affiliates to fend for themselves with local fare, and WRVA seemed to have figured out how to make localism profitable, and had turned a “local” broadcast into a regional and national one (with the attendant ad revenue).

The *Old Dominion Barn Dance* was a huge gamble for WRVA in an era of uncertainty. By the time WRVA had leased, redecorated, and reseeded the Lyric Theatre, which they could only do by committing to a five-year lease, the station had “talent and theatre rent commitments of over a hundred grand.”¹⁰⁴ But more than that, WRVA was gambling that hillbilly programming would become the station’s new angle in the postwar era. If the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* experiment had failed, WRVA would have been left without an anchor in its schedule. They would also have been back to square one for finding an audience to sell to advertisers. But the overwhelming popularity of the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* suggested that residents of Virginia and the Mid-Atlantic were interested in the rural rhythms of the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*. WRVA’s “hillbilly” – respectable, white, and working-class – had a loyal, lucrative following. The success of the experiment seemed to confirm the station’s hunch that “whitewashing” the dial, and seeking niche audiences among white southerners, would keep the station viable in the postwar period.

In 1991, a group of enterprising individuals launched an effort to bring back the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, corralling some of the original members,

¹⁰³ “PROMOTION” memorandum, n.d., LVA: WRVA Radio.

¹⁰⁴ “Sales Promotion Packet, n.d.” [1949 or 1950], LVA: WRVA Radio.

locating new talent, and booking the Carpenter Center for a series of performances. The comeback was not as large a success as investors had hoped, but it did inspire the local media to reflect upon what the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* had meant to performers and area residents. The “mostly middle-age-and-older crowd” who turned up for the revival expressed delight in the return of favorite musicians and jokes.¹⁰⁵ For many fans, the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* was the soundtrack of “Old Richmond,” a vague expression one reporter used presumably to describe Richmond as it had been in the 1950s: conservative, on the make, growing, segregated, and lively.¹⁰⁶

Despite the press's focus on what the show meant to “Old Richmond,” the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* had never intentionally glamorized Richmond, “Old” or “New.” In fact, it had all but ignored the city as it re-created on the stage an agrarian community that had undergone wholesale transformation in one generation. Postwar Richmond was teeming with new people and ideas that were rubbing uncomfortably against carefully maintained systems of privilege. Distinctions between working-class and middle-class whites were less clear than they had been just twenty years earlier. Women of all races had taken on new wartime roles that were not forgotten despite the emphasis on domesticity in the postwar period. Political winds were shifting as Oliver Hill and the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund worked steadily to prove the unconstitutionality of legal segregation. By the 1950s, “Old Richmond” had transformed as much as rural Virginia.

¹⁰⁵ Cindy Creasy, “Revived Barn Dance attracts old, new fans,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 14, 1991, E1, E9.

¹⁰⁶ Clark Bustard, “Barn Dance Revival,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 7, 1991, K1, K10.

At the very moment that Richmond and Virginia were becoming more cosmopolitan, WRVA put all its money on the guitar-wielding, ballad-singing, folksy, white men and women from the countryside. The station had fought for decades to position WRVA at the forefront of radio pioneering, taking particular pride in being one of the most powerful radio stations in the South. Broadcasting at 50,000 watts from “Down Where the South Begins,” they were bridging the perceived differences – cultural, economic, technological – between “the South” and everyone else in their first twenty or so years. Then, in the late 1940s, officials intentionally invested the station’s livelihood in a decidedly retro format. Hillbillies were neither modern nor urban, and WRVA entered the postwar period by looking backward.

Chapter 5
Sunshine on Capitol Hill:
The *Old Dominion Barn Dance* and Virginia's Political Culture

In May 1950, the Virginia Musical Festival was the scene of dramatic confrontation between Mary Workman and John Powell over what constituted “traditional” music in Virginia. The annual festival, held in Charlottesville in 1950, had added folk music to the line-up for the first time in its history, and Workman had been invited to sing “traditional ballads” as Sunshine Sue during the opening night’s program.¹ Workman accepted, but soon locked horns with John Powell, the widely acknowledged expert in Virginia folk music who was there “to advise” Workman on which ballads she would sing.² On the eve of opening night, festival president Francis Pickens Miller announced John Powell’s departure from the 1950 Virginia Music Festival, claiming “it was learned that he had not been able to assist Mrs. Workman.”³ A WRVA scrapbook about Sunshine Sue hints that Workman had threatened to withdraw from the festival herself if Powell did not back down.⁴ Sunshine Sue and her barn dance crew performed selections from Arthur Kyle Davis’s *Traditional Ballads of Virginia* on opening night as

¹ “Folk Musicians to Take Part in 1950 Virginia Music Festival,” *The Free-Lance Star*, April 27, 1950, 19. Mary Workman had always seen herself as more of a “folk musician” than a hillbilly artist. She accepted the “hillbilly” label as a necessary condition of success on Virginia radio. See Virginia (Ginger) Workman Stanley, interview by Caroline Morris, March 11, 2010..

² “Powell Not in Fete,” *Washington Post*, May 11, 1950, B2. Powell was an ethnomusicologist who specialized in Virginia folk music. He had a narrow definition of what constituted meritorious folk music, taking “pride in transmitting only music of the highest aesthetic quality.” In the 1930s, he launched an annual Folk Music Festival in Marion, Virginia, which one folklorist described as “a principle point of radiation for this incandescent personality.” Sidney Robertson Cowell, “John Powell” [obituary], *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* vol. 16 (1964): 112-113.

³ “Powell Not in Fete,” *Washington Post*, May 11, 1950, B2.

⁴ Sunshine Sue scrapbook, n.d., LVA: WRVA Radio.

scheduled; Powell left town.⁵ To those observing the drama, Mary Workman appeared to have won. Despite the controversy, the Fredericksburg *Free-Lance Star* wrote, “‘Sunshine Sue’ will shine tonight – and they’ll be coming ‘round a lot of mountains in Virginia to hear her.”⁶

The flare-up in Charlottesville could be reduced to conflicting artistic visions, not uncommon among musicians then as now. But a closer reading of the situation reveals a confrontation not only between two musicians, but between divergent forces in Virginia’s political culture. When John Powell died in 1963, his obituary in the *Journal of the International Folk Music Council* described him as “the principle spokesman for those who believed that the musical tradition most important to our national culture in the United States was that of our Anglo-Saxon inheritance.”⁷ For almost half a century, Powell had combed Virginia’s rural parts, seeking “authentic” folk music that met his high standards of quality and aesthetics – standards that were only vaguely defined. “Not that other sorts of folk music did not exist in Virginia,” claimed fellow ethnomusicologist Sidney Cowell:

Not that very beautiful tunes could not be found elsewhere, but one was always aware that a highly selective taste was influencing collectors of folk music there [in Virginia]. This was the sophisticated musical taste of that fiery missionary for purity of tradition and of musical quality.⁸

Powell’s zeal for “purity of tradition” extended beyond music, and seemed to be motivated by a much larger cause. Powell was one of the three founders of the

⁵ “‘Sunshine Sue’ Shines Tonight at Virginia’s Music Festival,” *The Free-Lance Star*, May 11, 1950, 8.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cowell, “John Powell” [obituary], 112.

⁸ Ibid.

Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America, and had been an architect of and campaigner for Virginia's racial integrity laws that were ultimately passed in 1924.⁹ His support for "purity" in white folk music corresponded to his equally devoted support to ensure the "purity" of the white race. In the world of music, "Mr. Powell's uncompromising devotion to the uncontaminated Anglo-Saxon tradition in Virginia influenced people far outside his own State," claimed Cowell. In matters of state, Powell's efforts resulted in legislation that legally defined whiteness as "no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian."¹⁰ Fear of *contamination* – either of "white" blood or "white" music – was a profound influence on Powell's work.

Mary Workman had a view of folk music that was not rigidly bound to any one type of sound, person, or geographical location. Workman "believ[ed] in folk music as the basic American music," and did not define it as narrowly as Powell.¹¹ Old popular ballads, hillbilly tunes, and cowboy songs were all welcome on her programs, as were hymns.¹² The music she played was the music of rural white folks – the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* did not have African Americans playing folk music on stage – but it was not selected based on its contribution to the preservation of a "pure" Anglo-Saxon heritage. A 1954 playbill described Workman and her husband as "grass-roots troubadours" who played the accordion and bass fiddle "while they sang their own arrangements of folk

⁹ For a detailed discussion of the passage of the Racial Integrity Act, see the introduction to this dissertation, and Richard B. Sherman, "The Last Stand": The Fight for Racial Integrity in Virginia in the 1920s," *The Journal of Southern History* vol. 54, no. 1 (February 1988): 69-92, quotation on 74.

¹⁰ Sherman, "The Last Stand," 75.

¹¹ *Listen*, vol. 1, no. 39 (Feb. 15, 1947): 1. LVA: Curley Collins Collection.

¹² *Ibid.*

music.”¹³ Workman borrowed from multiple musical traditions, and the performers on the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* represented different approaches to folk music. Though Workman was concerned with “respectability” and wholesome entertainment, musical *contamination* does not seem to have been a consideration.

The archives do not yield the specific details of the stand-off between Workman and Powell over “traditional ballads,” but it is likely that Powell took issue with Workman’s relatively inclusive approach to folk music. Powell had sold his vision of folk music to the Yorktown Sesquicentennial Commission, NBC, and even Eleanor Roosevelt.¹⁴ But he and Mary Workman – Virginia’s preeminent folk music performer – could not agree on what should or should not be included in her repertoire for the Virginia Music Festival.¹⁵ When Workman threatened to leave the festival if Powell had his way, she was in one sense protecting the integrity of her career; she was one of the few women charting a career in radio broadcasting at the time and was probably accustomed to challenges from male colleagues. But if she had walked out of the festival rather than acquiesce to Powell’s demands, she would have also walked away from the

¹³ *Hayride* Playbill, UVA: WRVA Radio.

¹⁴ Historian Michael Kammen described Powell as “an energetic collector, entrepreneur, and information ‘switchboard’ for those who shared his passion for American folk music.” In 1933, Powell persuaded Eleanor Roosevelt to attend his White Top Folk Festival in Marion, Virginia, and later convinced her to hold a folk music concert (directed by himself) at the White House. His connection to Eleanor Roosevelt came to NBC’s attention, and they invited him “to organize a series of Southern Folk-Music Programs for radio broadcast,” which he did. Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 429-430.

¹⁵ The *New York Times* delicately described the “misunderstanding” as one in which John Powell had been hired to “select the examples of folk music” that the Virginia Festival would showcase, only to discover “that his ideas were not those of the radio group, which also had been asked to project the old music.” “Virginia Festival: Mountain Folk in Kentucky Get Ready for Folksong Festival,” *New York Times*, May 28, 1950, 53.

racial ideologies that Powell had always infused into his work. Her victory was not only a victory for the sovereignty of her music and her career, but also a small if unintentional victory over the forces of white supremacy that had buttressed Jim Crow for a quarter of a century.

One last member of this minor drama deserves our attention briefly. Francis Pickens Miller, the festival's president and the man who announced John Powell's departure, had a rebellious streak as well. In 1950, he was at the height of his long political career, which more and more seemed to be dedicated to fighting "the Organization," as he called it.¹⁶ Miller had run for governor of Virginia in 1949 as a Democrat, despite not getting Harry Byrd's "nod." Byrd had chosen John S. Battle, a state senator from Charlottesville, as the presumptive heir, but Miller – a "longtime opponent of the machine" – mounted a strong campaign, and came close to winning the primary.¹⁷ Rather than conceding the impossibility of opposing the Organization, Miller made clear in his concession to Battle that he intended to keep hammering away at Byrd's machine until it gave way: "Our movement will continue to organize the forces of the Democratic party until we have taken over control of the party...This is but the first round. We will

¹⁶ Historian Peter Henriques describes the situation as a unique political moment for an internal assault against the Democratic machine: "the comparatively weak liberal movement had found in Colonel Miller a courageous and eloquent leader. Miller not only had the desire, but equally important the *time* and the *money* to organize the liberals more effectively than before." Peter R. Henriques, "The Byrd Organization Crushes a Liberal Challenges, 1950-1953," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* vol. 87, no. 1 (January 1979), 3-29, quotation on 4.

¹⁷ Heinemann, et al, *Old Dominion, New Commonwealth*, 337-338. Byrd "threw himself into the campaign with an intensity not witnessed since John Garland Pollard's election in 1929," and Battle still only squeaked out a victory, which Byrd referred to as "my election success in Virginia." In the four-person Democratic primary, Battle won 43 percent of the vote to Miller's 35 percent. At mid-century, the Democratic primary was the *de facto* gubernatorial election in Virginia.

continue to fight until we have a complete victory.”¹⁸ In 1950, he and the anti-machine forces of the Democratic party were beginning to prepare for Miller to oppose Harry Byrd himself for the 1952 senatorial election.

So when Mary Workman took a hard line against John Powell, and Francis Pickens Miller backed her up – saying “we very much want you to appear, and we will expect you to appear...The criticism is based on misunderstanding and ignorance” – she prevailed in an artistic dust-up with complex political implications.¹⁹ In one sense, Workman had scored a victory as a woman in a man’s profession, having succeeded in promoting her artistic vision over the established (male) “expert’s.” In another sense, she had taken a position against Powell’s interpretation of “tradition” that privileged the notion of “pure” Anglo-Saxon roots to the exclusion of anything that did not conform with his ideals. She had also gone up against the originator of the Racial Integrity laws and the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America, and trumped him with her “Queen of the Hillbillies” card, suggesting that even among white Virginians there was not solid support for the type of “racial purity” and agenda for white supremacy that Powell espoused.²⁰ In the process of standing up to Powell, Workman had found an ally in Miller, the leading voice of white opposition to the Byrd machine and to the way it did business.

¹⁸ Peter R. Henriques, “The Byrd Organization Crushes a Liberal Challenge, 1950-1953,” 4.

¹⁹ “Sunshine Sue’ Shines Tonight at Virginia’s Music Festival,” *The Free-Lance Star*, May 11, 1950, 8.

²⁰ “Queen of the Hillbillies” is the title that Governor William Tuck gave Sue in 1948. She was given the title because of her overwhelming popularity with Virginians, and her abilities as a musician.

Mary Workman was not a political operator, but she nevertheless occupied a position in Virginia's mid-century political culture. As John Powell found out in 1950, Workman/Sunshine Sue did not always conform to expectations of gender, race, or class, and as such would become a public actor on Virginia's contested political stage. Workman did not give overtly political commentary on life in mid-century Virginia, but her actions and her music, as well as the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* generally, sometimes placed her square in the middle of debates about authority and power in the Commonwealth. And even though she worked for WRVA, which had always had deep connections to Harry Byrd and his machine, Workman and the *Barn Dance* sometimes found themselves more in line with the Francis Pickens Millers of the world than the John Powells.

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Sunshine Sue, Mrs. John E. Workman, Mary Higdon Workman: WRVA's most famous personality at mid-century responded to all three names, as though she were three women instead of one. Workman was the linchpin of the "big hillbilly operation" that WRVA officials had bet the farm on in the late 1940s and early 1950s. She was the centerpiece of several programs on WRVA, and attracted listeners with the force of her personality. She was talented, charming, feminine, and breaking all the rules. By the end of her career, this ambitious and successful career woman from Iowa had been held up as a model of white Virginian womanhood, even though her life was in many ways a direct contradiction of that model.

Mary Arlene Higdon was born in 1915, the last of six children “of farm folk” in Keosauqua, Iowa.²¹ The Higdon family valued hard work and faith in God, and Mary attempted to live up to those values the rest of her life. Her daughter Ginger Stanley explained that Mary Higdon “adored her mother and one older sister. They were everything to her until they passed away. And she told me once, she said you know I would never want them to be disappointed in me.”²² The woman who would one day rule the Mid-Atlantic airwaves was raised by strong farmwomen who taught her that work and family went hand in hand.

Although Higdon would partially return to a farming way of life later on, she left the farm as soon as it was practicable. She married her sweetheart John Workman “out of high school,” and, along with John’s brothers George and Sam, set out to make a living by playing country music.²³ The life of itinerant musicians is never easy, and the Great Depression did not make it easier.²⁴ “We started out as hamburger hillbillies, the kind that travel in a jalopy and stage shows wherever we find an audience of one or more,” Mary Workman told a *Chicago Tribune* reporter in 1953.²⁵

But there were opportunities for ambitious musical artists of the 1930s that had not existed even a decade earlier. The four young adults travelled across

²¹ Stanley claimed she was the youngest of six. Virginia (Ginger) Workman Stanley, interview by Caroline Morris, March 11, 2010. The *Hayride* Playbill claimed she was the youngest of seven. *Hayride* Playbill, UVA: WRVA Radio.

²² Virginia (Ginger) Workman Stanley, interview by Caroline Morris, March 11, 2010..

²³ Sylvia Costen, “Queen of the Hill Billies’ Is Business Woman, Talent Agent, Housewife and Mother, Too,” *Richmond News Leader*, April 29, 1948, 17

²⁴ Mary Higdon Workman would probably never have succeeded as an itinerant musician had she not been married. It is unlikely that she could have travelled as freely as she did, and won as many radio gigs as she did, without a husband to lend her some “respectability.”

²⁵ Anton Remenih, “Critic Admires Sunshine Sue and Sugarfoot,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 4, 1953, 8.

the country, often bartering musical performances for lodgings, meals, or even cups of coffee.²⁶ Mary would sell radio advertising during the day in exchange for radio engagements in the evenings.²⁷ Like aspiring musicians all over the country, the Workmans looked to radio for their break. Live performances, not recording contracts, were the most lucrative ventures for musicians of all sorts, but especially those who specialized in country or hillbilly music.²⁸ Mary Workman and her companions joined the growing world of radio barn dances, playing on WHAS, Louisville, on the *National Barn Dance* in Chicago, and *The Midwestern Hayride* on Cincinnati's WLW during the 1930s. Barn dances did not necessarily offer stability, but it was the best money available for country music at the time. The group was moderately successful in the Midwestern barn dance circuit, but leapt at the opportunity to "start anew" in Richmond in 1939.²⁹ Although hillbilly music had been part of WRVA's line-up since it went on the air, the station did not yet have a barn dance or a stable "hillbilly" troupe. The Workmans referred to themselves as "folk" or "country" musicians most of the time, but willingly accepted the hillbilly label when they came to Virginia. After all, it was much better to be working hillbillies than unemployed folk artists.

²⁶ According to the playbill for her one and only Broadway show, the Workmans "bucked the depression of the 1930s by playing small radio stations for coffee and cake, and, as Sue says, 'Sometimes you had to make a choice, you couldn't have both.'" *Hayride* Playbill, UVA: WRVA Radio.

²⁷ Virginia (Ginger) Workman Stanley, interview by Caroline Morris, March 11, 2010.

²⁸ "Lucrative" is a relative term, however. Richard Peterson argues that making a living on the barn dance circuit – while better than being unemployed – was no great shakes. "The exigencies of making a marginal living from music profoundly affected the music itself." Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 111.

²⁹ Tom Netherland, "Heyday: Sunshine Sue, Strategic Straw, and Hillbilly Songs Aplenty," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, May 27, 2001, H1, H2.

Workman brought her work ethic and ambition to Richmond, and pioneered a career for herself at WRVA. While Bertha Hewlett was pulling herself up in the station's administrative ranks, Mary Workman was carefully and determinedly insinuating herself into nearly every aspect of the studio's broadcasting concerns. Not only did she become the station's most easily recognizable performer and personality, but she also became a sharp businesswoman, sometimes on behalf of the station and sometimes on behalf of herself and her husband. By the early 1950s, Workman had her fingers in just about every aspect of the radio barn dance business, possibly the only woman to do so in the history of radio barn dances. Her excellent management skills, artistic sensibilities, and financial acumen enabled her to forge a career where no other woman had. Looking back at her career some fifty years later, musician and writer Tom Netherland described her as a "performer, organizer, boss. Pioneer."³⁰ Such an assessment is accurate, if deceptively succinct. Workman forged an immensely successful career – especially by the standards of the time – by deploying policies of horizontal and vertical organization that any robber baron would have respected.

All radio barn dances required a narrator, conductor, and cruise director, who were combined into the role of the "M.C.," or Master of Ceremonies, which had always been a man. Variety shows, for example, were invariably emceed by men. The only exceptions were cases in which it was important to have a sexy female voice on the air. Arlene Francis, for example, was billed as the "femcee" of the Maxwell House show *Blind Date*, though she was acting more as on-air

³⁰ Ibid.

matchmaker and potential chaperone than a master of ceremonies.³¹ Some women, like Mary Margaret McBride, ran their own talk shows, but only because network officials believed that was the best way to attract a large female audience that could then be sold to advertisers at a premium. Although McBride was one of the most financially successful radio hosts on the networks, radio insiders hardly considered her show “real,” because it was created by and for women. A 1949 *Newsweek* article demeaned both McBride and her audience as unimportant, despite her good ratings: “Her audience is almost wholly feminine – fluttery, middle-aged, and purely housewife. Men, as a rule, disdain the show. Essentially, these facts do not make Mary Margaret an important cog in the complex machinery that is radio.”³² It would have been unthinkable to give a woman the captaincy of a mixed-cast ensemble. Historian Daniel Craig argues that centuries-old customs and prejudices that discouraged or prevented women from participating in the public sphere were quickly adapted to radio. Historically, American women who gave public speeches were maligned with accusations of shrillness, madness, or – worse – subversion. “So it is not surprising,” argues Craig, “that [women’s] supposed inability to use radio should have been discovered so soon after its invention.”³³

When the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* went on the air in 1946, it did not have an “M.C.” but a “Femcee” (the station’s word for it). Sunshine Sue, in a

³¹ On *Blind Date*, Arlene Francis encouraged servicemen to “sell themselves and their good qualities, such that the beautiful starlets listening would want to choose them as their ‘blind date.’” Donna Halper argues that Francis was adept at the potentially awkward role of the liaison. Halper, *Invisible Stars*, 114.

³² “The McBride Phenomenon,” *Newsweek* 33 (May 30, 1949): 56.

³³ Douglas B. Craig, *Fireside Politics: Radio and Political Culture in the U.S., 1920-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 249.

gingham dress and heels, stood in front of a live audience on Friday and Saturday nights and led a group of local and traveling musicians through a free-flowing script. On weekday mornings, she took the lead role at the microphone, delivering hillbilly music and prayers directly into the bedrooms and kitchens of sleepy listeners. Her voice and her body were at the front of every performance; listeners' first sensory impression of her shows was *her*, and she was wildly popular. There had never been a woman "M.C." for a barn dance before, perhaps because producers felt that audiences expected a man to be in the lead role, or because of long-standing resistance to women in public entertainment, or more simply because of the constellation of challenges career women faced that have more recently been labeled the "glass ceiling." But in Richmond, on the threshold of the South, the station's premier live music product was presided over by a white, Midwestern woman.

Workman's success with the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* is even more impressive given the era in which her career took off and peaked. As mentioned in chapter 3, women who had made great strides in the Depression-era and wartime working worlds found their opportunities severely curtailed in the postwar era, including married, white women. Bertha Hewlett and Mary Margaret McBride were both unmarried, and perhaps faced less discrimination in hiring practices because it was acceptable for a single woman to support herself (although she was never supposed to support herself in *too much style*). But a married white woman, who presumably could rely upon her husband for financial support, was taking a job away from another man, especially if she pursued a

non-pink-collar career.³⁴ Workman was married when she and her husband arrived at WRVA, and WRVA may have decided to hire her partly because they came as a team, like Burns and Allen. Unlike Burns and Allen, however, Workman was the star of the show, and the other artists did her bidding. It was unprecedented, and all the more unlikely given WRVA's position "down where the South begins."

Workman was not only the face and voice of the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, but also the program's talent agent and producer, becoming perhaps the only woman in America to fill those three roles simultaneously. It was rare for a woman to work as a talent agent, partially because women rarely brokered contracts in the radio business, and partially because women rarely traveled for any business in the mid-twentieth century. Workman, perhaps drawing on experiences from her young adulthood, traveled far in search of fresh talent, visiting countless local acts in Virginia and North Carolina, and occasionally farther afield to Chicago or Nashville. She had the authority to offer and negotiate contracts, and helped usher many new performers into the barn dance business.

Two young performers, Janis Martin and Ramona Jones, reflected on Workman's influence in their first years in the industry. Both were recruited by

³⁴ White Americans ascribed a different set of values to the labor of non-white women, and especially for African American women in the South. The labor of black women was a simultaneous marker of class and race, and reinforced black women's position at the bottom of the Jim Crow hierarchies. This position was reinforced by low wages and limited opportunities. African Americans also ascribed a set of values to black women's work, and these values differed markedly from dominant white impressions. As Tera Hunter has shown in *To 'Joy My Freedom*, working black women held positions of responsibility and authority in their households and in their communities, partly because they were respected as wage-earners and providers. Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Workman as young women, and went on to have successful careers. Workman heard Martin sing at the annual Tobacco Festival in South Boston, Virginia, and offered her an opportunity that most hillbilly musicians were waiting for: a steady job in a city with a decent salary. Martin jumped at Workman's offer of \$50 a night for regular work on the *Barn Dance* in Richmond. "I thought I was in big money," explained Martin.³⁵ Ramona Jones had won a fiddle contest on a local radio station in Indiana, and Workman tracked her down. "I was sitting in algebra class. Someone said I had a long-distance call from Richmond." Presumably, Jones needed little convincing to abandon algebra for the barn dance stage, but Jones gave Workman credit for more than her recruitment. "Sue was wonderful to me. I'm so glad at this stage in the game that I started out with people like Sue and John [Workman]."³⁶ Mary Workman helped budding musicians, like she herself had been during the Depression, get a solid start on radio. Under her leadership, the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* became a clearing house for hillbilly or country artists, and a roster of regular and guest performers reads like a Who's Who of country musicians of the 1950s.

Along with her husband, Mary Workman turned her casting talents into an incorporated business at the same time that she was building the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*. "Southland, Incorporated," also sometimes referred to as "Southland Shows," brought national shows to Richmond in the late 1940s and 1950s, including *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Oklahoma*, as well as wildly popular

³⁵ Norman Rowe, "Danville Singer Helped to Inspire Willis' Album," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, May 19, 1991, J10.

³⁶ Tom Netherland, "Heyday: Sunshine Sue, Strategic Straw, and Hillbilly Songs Aplenty," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, May 27, 2001, H1, H2.

country singer Gene Autry. The Workmans also used their corporation “as a hillbilly talent agency for WRVA.”³⁷ When Mary Workman signed artists for WRVA, she was making money for her own business as well as growing WRVA’s hillbilly operation in general and her own program in particular. Her business instincts were sound, and she had a virtual lock on the hillbilly circuit that ran through Richmond in the late 1940s.³⁸ She was the kind voice on the phone offering the chance of a lifetime to farm girls like Ramona Jones and Janis Martin, and she had learned how to leverage that skill into a side business. Sunshine Sue Workman was as sharp a businesswoman as she was a showman.

Other aspects of Workman’s career were more “conventional,” in as much as any woman had a “conventional” career in radio. Just as she had in her earliest days on the road with her husband and brothers-in-law, Mary Workman continued to drum up business through advertising revenue. Advertisers soon learned that if Sunshine Sue endorsed a product, they could expect steady business from her listeners. “Her folksy manner, pretty face and homespun delivery created immediate response from housewives who trusted Sue to lead

³⁷ Sylvia Costen, “Queen of the Hill Billies’ Is Business Woman, Talent Agent, Housewife and Mother, Too,” *Richmond News Leader*, April 29, 1948, 17. See also C.E. Butterfield, “Network Radio Show Makes ‘Sue’ a National Personality,” *Richmond News Leader*, April 23, 1953, 56.

³⁸ Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg describe Workman’s acumen in unflattering terms: “She was one heck of a businesswoman. She rarely saw a marketing opportunity that gave her pause. After her first son was born, she allowed a southern soft-drink company to put out mini-diapers that read, ‘Sunshine Sue says it’s time for a change – to Dr. Pepper!’ They also credit Workman’s desire to control all the hillbilly music bookings in Richmond with the departure of the Carter family. Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?: The Carter Family and Their Legacy in American Music* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 262-263.

them right on everything from syrup to starch.”³⁹ In the spring of 1947, Sue read spots for Lightner Poultry Farms, and the farm sold fifty thousand baby chicks weekly, “so many the advertiser was forced to cancel because his supply was exhausted.”⁴⁰ Workman used her womanhood as a selling point, occasionally employing a conspiratorial woman-to-woman tone. Common wisdom held that “women spend more time listening to the radio than they spend doing anything else except sleeping and working – and they also listen while they work,” so anyone who could connect with them could connect advertisers to an enormous army of potential consumers.⁴¹

WRVA salesmen and advertisers both seemed to think that Sunshine Sue had the ear of every woman in Virginia in the early 1950s. And outside Virginia as well, if WRVA promotion materials were to be believed: “You just don’t sell hillbillies to a New York time buyer without proving your goods. We sell hillbillies to New York time buyers – at a premium.”⁴² The *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, under Mary Workman’s guidance, had become WRVA’s cash cow, and their most successful competitor for advertising revenue in the television era. In July 1953, Sunshine Sue explained to a *Chicago Tribune* reporter, “We got a sayin’ in radio business down home [Richmond]. We say, ‘He’s happy as a hillbilly with a commercial’; I know just how that feels now.”⁴³

³⁹ “Sunshine Sue Changes Her Tune,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Nov. 9, 1970, B1.

⁴⁰ Barn Dance History, Jan. 6, 1948, Scrapbook, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁴¹ “Money and Martha,” *Newsweek* 35 (June 26, 1950): 44.

⁴² “Sales Promotion Packets, n.d.” [1949 or 1950], LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁴³ Anton Remenih, “Critic Admires Sunshine Sue and Sugarfoot,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 4, 1953.

Former station manager John Tansey, reflecting on Mary Workman's success in the 1950s, remarked "Sue was well-planned and had a lot of personal charm and warmth. She was an excellent – and I emphasize excellent – businesswoman, because at WRVA I had to negotiate with her ever so many times, but she was a reasonable person." Cast member and long-time friend Curley Collins chimed in, claiming she was "a good showman...she could make the money and John really knew how to hold it."⁴⁴ In fact, Mary Workman often demurred when reporters or fans asked her about money matters, saying "John has the brains and I have the big mouth."⁴⁵ Her role in negotiating with performers and WRVA managers on behalf of Southland Shows indicates otherwise, but dodging direct questions about the business allowed her to maintain the illusion she crafted as Sunshine Sue. On-stage, Sue performed a role with feminine charm, grace, and virtue. But off-stage, Mary Workman deployed traditionally masculine virtues such as ambition, competitiveness, and gamesmanship. She turned out to be just as adept in the negotiations room as behind the microphone.

Mary Workman toiled mainly in a world of men, though she wore high heels and flowers in her hair. Not only was she her own boss, but she also held a position of authority over dozens of men. Bertha Hewlett could have told her that such a position was fraught with peril, though Workman probably did not need that advice. Like Hewlett, Workman leveraged expectations of femininity

⁴⁴ "Members of Original Barn Dance Recall Early Days in City," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 16, 1975, H1.

⁴⁵ Zwonitzer and Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?: The Carter Family and Their Legacy in American Music*, 262.

against obstacles to her career, both on-stage and off. She let others define and label her, and then quietly worked toward her own ends. Regrettably, few of Workman's own thoughts have been preserved; most of the personal accounts we have were relayed to journalists or station officials and therefore probably reflect a level of filtering. But by looking at the aggregate of her interviews and publicity materials, and comparing them to the multiple ways she deployed various notions of femininity and with what effect, we can begin to piece together an image of the ways that white women were quietly but effectively revising expectations of white women, and womanhood in general, in mid-twentieth-century Virginia.

In 1948, Mary Workman made headlines in the local press after Virginia Governor William Tuck officially designated her the "Queen of the Hillbillies." The stories, most of which were published in the women's section of the newspapers, all aspired to look "behind the scenes" at the popular performer, fully publicizing her private life. Just what sort of woman was this queen? A hillbilly or an aristocrat? Was it possible to be both? And was she a career woman or a mother and wife who happened to sing (for money)? Could one woman be two women, as Mary Workman and Sunshine Sue were? Was this to be admired or feared?

The first quandary writers and readers faced was a question of nomenclature. Sunshine Sue and Mary Workman may have been the same person, but "Sunshine Sue," "Mrs. John E. Workman," and even "Mrs. Workman"

carried different meanings in print.⁴⁶ Writers tended to refer to Workman as “Sunshine Sue” or “Sue,” especially when describing her work with the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*. “Mrs. John E. Workman” spent her time in the family’s home in Ashland, caring for her husband and children and presumably going about the business of an “average” white mother in Virginia. Such a duality of nomenclature reflected the two minds with which the public regarded Mary Workman. Readers and listeners knew her as “Sue,” which is undoubtedly the main reason the newspapers chose the name. Still, the compulsion to draw a line between her public and private personae was strong enough that the writers felt it necessary to employ a separate name altogether for her domestic role, even though readers might have been unfamiliar with it.

The two names also drew a line between Sue-the-working-woman and Mrs.-Workman-the-housewife that corresponded with expectations of class for white Virginians. Not working for pay and not laboring outside of the home were hallmarks of middle-class whiteness for white southern women of the early twentieth century.⁴⁷ Having a woman working outside the home, on the other hand, was traditionally a marker of reduced social status for white families, and working-class white women were mostly absent in southern popular culture because of it. As Mary Frederickson points out, paradoxically, “the same

⁴⁶ I do not believe I have a single example of an article referring to Sunshine Sue as Mary Workman, as I have chosen to do in this dissertation. I attribute the insistence on “Mrs. John Workman” to editorial policy at the Richmond newspapers, and to social custom of the time.

⁴⁷ In her study of white women in turn-of-the-century Texas, Judith McArthur found that “middle- and upper-class white women negotiated public roles tentatively,” partly because the “cult of the Lost Cause, which celebrated the ideals of the defeated Confederacy, urged elite women to uphold the model of antebellum southern ladyhood.” Judith N. McArthur, *Creating the New Woman: The Rise of Southern Women’s Progressive Culture in Texas, 1893-1918* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 3.

economy and society that produced this regional 'lady' has always depended more heavily on women's labor than that of any other part of the country."⁴⁸ After the upheavals of World War and women's mass entrance into the workforce, the paradox made even less sense, but white Virginians still clung to assumptions of race and class that were heavily predicated on white women's work. If women's work outside the home separated the working-class from the middle-class, and if women's work outside the home separated whites from blacks, how to understand Mary Workman? White working-class women were nearly invisible in the public discourse because they disrupted so many conventions of race and class, but here was a white woman being celebrated for her work. The slippage between "Mrs. John Workman" and "Sunshine Sue" in the newspaper articles conveys the degree of discursive confusion that arose when a working white woman suddenly became "visible." In order to balance the disruption, the papers also had to paint her as a white middle-class housewife.

Labels can only go so far toward compartmentalizing the significance of a person's life, however. A 1950 *Commonwealth* article demonstrated the inherent complications in using two names to describe one person. Under a photo of Workman feeding her daughter in a high chair, a caption reads: "At home it's Mrs. Workman – a big hit with [daughter] Virginia Sue." At first glance, it seems clear enough; when Sue is at home, she is Mrs. Workman, a "normal" wife and mother. Just next to the photograph and caption, however, the copy reads: "Sue's daily routine includes affectionate care of her two children, Virginia

⁴⁸ Mary Frederickson, "'Sassing Fate': Women Workers in the Twentieth-Century South" in *Taking Off the White Gloves: Southern Women and Women Historians*, edited by Michele Gillespie and Catherine Clinton (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 15.

Sue...and Bill.”⁴⁹ Although the caption baldly stated that Mrs. Workman took care of Virginia Sue, it would seem that Sunshine Sue also performed that duty.

The *Richmond News Leader* published a picture of Workman in an apron with a mixing bowl, identifying her as “Mrs. John Workman.” Beneath the photo identification, however, was the following description: “Cook, Talent, Agent, Businesswoman, Mother.” What had happened to Sunshine Sue? Reporter Sylvia Costen offered this vague explanation, “Sue is no dual personality, but only her talent of singing and accordion playing show in her public appearances. As Mrs. John E. Workman, she has many others. She is a talent agent, a keen businesswoman, a mother and a housewife. All of these command the same awesome energy that goes into being Femcee of a fan-crowded hillbilly music program.”⁵⁰ Costen suggested that while Sunshine Sue was the Femcee of the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* – the woman who worked in public – Mrs. John Workman was the woman who attended to further business affairs and the running of her household in the private world. The *New York Times* made the suggestion more succinctly in 1954, introducing the *Barn Dance’s* Femcee as Sunshine Sue, “in private life Mrs. John Workman.”⁵¹ Sunshine Sue existed in the public world of men while Mrs. John Workman operated in a world open to “normal” women. But if that were true, was being a businesswoman an accepted option for a wife and mother in mid-century Virginia, as the *News Leader* article

⁴⁹ Margaret Brown, “The Queen of the Hillbillies,” *The Commonwealth*, vol. 17, no. 3 (March 1950): 13.

⁵⁰ Sylvia Costen, “‘Queen of Hill Billies’ Is Business Woman, Talent Agent, Housewife and Mother, Too,” *Richmond News Leader*, April 29, 1948, 17.

⁵¹ L.F., “At the Theatre. ‘Hayride Has Premiere at the 48th Street,’” *New York Times*, Sept. 14, 1954, 24.

implied? The struggle over language left open tantalizing possibilities of interpretation that disrupted the very dichotomies that the careful language was supposed to suggest.

We have little indication of Workman's feelings about the image of a two-sided woman that the press built, though there is some evidence that she was aware of the necessity of playing to the audience. In the words of her daughter Ginger Stanley, Workman "adapted to the area and the way she felt people wanted to hear her talk."⁵² Stanley was referring to Workman's southern accent as Sunshine Sue, but the anecdote hints at a broader adaptability. As a "showman," Workman understood the *Barn Dance* had to resonate with listeners. As the "front man" for the *Barn Dance*, she needed to personally resonate with them. One such way was playing to their expectations and performing the role they expected. "If anyone tells me I'm a good cook, or a good mother, or a good housekeeper, it pleases me more than if they say I sing well," Workman "confided" to *News Leader* reporter Sylvia Costen.⁵³ The interview appeared next to an article entitled "New Gadgets on Autos Please Women Drivers" and above an advertisement for a sale of "4-H Club Baby Beef." When a reporter for the women's section came calling, Workman would have been aware of the audience. She spoke woman-to-woman, not just with Costen but with the entire audience. The resulting tableau of Workman's carefully crafted self-image and the newspaper's coverage of her created an impression that Workman was validating the hard work of housekeeping. She may have had a career and she

⁵² Virginia (Ginger) Workman Stanley, interview by Caroline Morris, March 11, 2010.

⁵³ Sylvia Costen, "Queen of Hill Billies' Is Business Woman, Talent Agent, Housewife and Mother, Too," *Richmond News Leader*, April 29, 1948, 17.

may have worked outside of the home, but the tableau implied she was also interested in sales on 4-H club beef.

Workman's situation was not so different from Bertha Hewlett's. She was a white woman filling a white man's position, and she manipulated other people's impressions of her femininity partly to win over fans and colleagues who might have otherwise been put off by her transgression into the masculine world. Mary Workman was not trying to be a man among men, but an exceptional woman among men. In order to be accepted into the fraternal world of radio administration and programming, she had to minimize her threat to white male colleagues at the same time that she performed on a higher level than any of them. Such a strategy gave her the latitude to pursue a wide variety of initiatives without explicitly challenging the heavily gendered system of privilege that white men expected and relied upon in mid-century Virginia. What is most interesting and enlightening, however, about Workman's experience is that expectations were shifting beneath her feet, which is one explanation for the clumsy, unsuccessful, but perpetual attempts to classify her.

Was she a career woman or a mother? A tough negotiator or a housewife? Was she a "normal" woman – someone who fulfilled the dominant expectations of her class, race, and gender – or was she different? The articles oscillated between Sunshine Sue and Mrs. John Workman, and presented a mixed portrait. Those who step beyond prescribed social boundaries are often the targets of curiosity and policing, women being particularly vulnerable to judgment. In Workman's case, however, the articles and reviews demonstrated

a remarkable tolerance and acceptance of her endeavors, both professional and domestic. Sunshine Sue and Mrs. John E. Workman seemed to combine into a model of [white] womanhood. Her career and situation were unique, certainly, but the local reaction to her success suggested that other local women found something to admire in her efforts. Certainly Governor Tuck found something to admire, and he was no social radical.

The seeming duality of Mary Workman – as both Sunshine Sue and Mrs. John E. Workman – initially fascinated her public, and I would argue that the same duality endeared her to them. Few white women in Richmond were forging careers in traditionally masculine arenas in the 1950s. As mentioned in chapter 3, opportunities for women were shrinking in the face of postwar demobilization and a growing social conservatism in Virginia. And yet, Workman was widely admired for having a foot each in the masculine world of business and performance, and the feminine world of the home. The continued insistence on applying two names to the same woman suggests a fundamental tension between the archetypes of the white working woman and the white homemaker, but underneath the tension was a basic acceptance of white women's work outside the home, and of the possibility that white women could do many kinds of work in many different environments.

Though Sunshine Sue was well-known to many WRVA listeners, it is doubtful she would have become as large of a local celebrity without the assistance of the Commonwealth's chief executive, Governor Bill Tuck. Tuck had a thing for Workman, and went out of his way to support the *Old Dominion*

Barn Dance and Workman's career.⁵⁴ His public admiration of Sunshine Sue brought Mary Workman and the barn dance performers squarely into Virginia's mid-century political culture, where they implicitly disrupted the carefully constructed social hierarchies that held Jim Crow Virginia together. Workman was already transgressing social norms by performing as a Femcee and infiltrating the masculine world of business. But the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, positioned as it was directly uphill from the Capitol building, introduced alternative understandings of class and status into the broader political discourse. At a time when Virginia politicians actively attempted to roll back social change, the most famous act on Capitol Hill thumbed its nose, albeit politely, at privilege and elitism.

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The *Old Dominion Barn Dance* counted farmers and city folks, men and women, well-to-do and just-getting-by of all races among their fans. Though the live audience was mostly white Richmonders, the program's radio audience initially stretched far up the Eastern Seaboard, and eventually all around the world. But of all the fans the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* enjoyed over the years, perhaps their biggest was a man named William Munford Tuck, who just happened to be the Governor of Virginia.

William M. Tuck, known to friends as "Bill," made no secret of his admiration for the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*. Described as an "avid fan," Tuck would drop by the live performance with friends on Saturday nights "for

⁵⁴ He even allegedly procured an advanced copy of "You Are My Sunshine" for her, which became her signature song.

entertainment and relaxation.”⁵⁵ Tuck took office as governor of Virginia nine months before the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*'s opening performance in September of 1946, just yards from the Governor's Mansion and General Assembly building.⁵⁶ Through his term, sometimes to the open derision of his wife and colleagues, Tuck was an unabashed enthusiast for hillbilly music, hillbilly musicians, and especially Sunshine Sue.

In most ways, Bill Tuck was a typical Byrd Organization man. He was from a wealthy, white, landowning family in Southside Virginia, and he was a Democrat. He had attended two Virginia schools (the College of William and Mary and Washington and Lee University) for his undergraduate and law degrees, and excelled at intrapersonal relations more than academic pursuits. Most crucially, he had played the game of patronage that defined Byrd's machine in early-twentieth-century Virginia. When he came to the Governor's Mansion in 1946, he came with Byrd's permission (if not his blessing) and he took his position at the helm of conservatism.⁵⁷

Bill Tuck was not cast entirely from the same mold as his predecessors. He advanced the forces of conservatism during his tenure, and he worked within the Byrd Organization rather than against it. He opposed organized labor and

⁵⁵ “Old Dominion Barn Dance Latest Feature Heard on WSAZ,” *Listen*, vol. 1, no. 39. (Feb. 15, 1947): 1. LVA: Curley Collins Collection.

⁵⁶ The *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, in fact, became an installation of Richmond's Capitol Hill, as WRVA took a five-year lease out on the Lyric Theatre. The governor, state senators and state representatives, and WRVA's hillbillies were all occupying the same space.

⁵⁷ By the time Tuck ran for governor in 1945, “the machine that Byrd had assumed command of twenty years before and molded into his own fiefdom was running as flawlessly as ever.” He was therefore miffed when Tuck announced his candidacy “before the leadership had spoken.” Tuck had enough support among machine veterans, however, that Byrd felt obliged to go along with it. Byrd later came to see Tuck as an able and loyal footsoldier for the Organization. Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 270-272.

saw its power severely diminished by the passage of a right-to-work law. For all his commitment to objectives of Virginia's Democratic Party, however, Tuck had decidedly working-class tastes in entertainment.⁵⁸ He was no fan of the opera, preferring the relaxed, inclusive atmosphere of the barn dance. And above all, he adored Sunshine Sue. Judging from his actions and statements, he thought Sunshine Sue was just about the most wonderful woman in the whole state of Virginia. Although Mary Workman never claimed to represent any particular group of people, Sunshine Sue had become a hero for Virginians with working-class or rural roots. And now the most elite of all elite men in Virginia had a standing reservation at all of her performances.⁵⁹

Any man's musical tastes are his own business, but if that man also happens to be a public figure his musical tastes become everyone else's business, too. Tuck's love of hillbilly music and the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* was fodder for gossip and speculation in postwar Virginia, partly because it was so unconventionally *low-brow* for a Virginia governor.⁶⁰ In 1994, James Latimer,

⁵⁸ For the sake of efficiency, I am referring to all Virginians who worked with their hands as working-class, or as being part of the working classes. In this group, I am including farmers, industrial workers, domestic workers, artisans, and others who did not work in an office. Where appropriate, I will specifically refer to "working-class women" or the "white working class," but I will frequently employ the term without qualification. There was a working class in Virginia, though it was frequently made invisible by insistence on rhetorically separating people by race and gender. I want to avoid replicating that pattern here.

⁵⁹ As discussed in chapter 4, cultural critics looked down on hillbilly music and barn dances as "low" art in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly when compared to "high" art like opera, classical music, or Shakespearean theatre. By the 1940s, the criticism had largely mellowed, but journalists and other social commentators continued to draw distinctions between the "low" art of the barn dance and the "high" art of opera, with the barn dance representing common, mass culture and the opera representing "true" art. Larry Levine has suggested that cultural elites articulated distinctions between "high" and "low" culture largely to make clear distinctions between themselves and the American working class. "Low brow" culture was the popular, commercialized culture of working-class Americans, in which barn dances and hillbilly music played a critical role. Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow*.

⁶⁰ According to William Crawley, even Tuck's own wife "regarded his musical taste with some disdain." Crawley, *Bill Tuck: A Political Life in Byrd's Virginia*, 53. Tuck's taste in music became

the “emeritus political analyst and folk historian of the Richmond Times-Dispatch” opined that Tuck “was one of the most backward governors we ever had. Proudly backward.”⁶¹ Hillbillies were working-class entertainment at best, and commercial trash at worst. Beneath observers’ snide remarks about Tuck’s extracurricular musical tastes was a basic confusion about why a Virginia governor, that paragon of white southern gentlemanliness, was interested in attending such a circus in the first place. The system of privilege that had provided Tuck with the means of assuming the governorship relied upon carefully maintained divisions of social status and race. The *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, while not exactly countercultural, advanced a subtle critique of the mechanisms of power by heralding working men and women as the “true” moral core of the region or nation.

★

Workman’s daughter Ginger Stanley has many memories of Governor Tuck attending her mother’s performances. “He would just walk over, or, if there were dignitaries, and he wanted her to come to the mansion, they would actually go over there and perform for dignitaries that came and had dinner with the

news itself, and newspapers commented on it from time to time to imply that Tuck was “different” from the governors that had come before him, and not in a flattering way. Historian Ron Heinemann writes that “Tuck...offended Byrd’s image of what a Virginia governor should be: quiet, courtly, and deferential.” Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 270. A 1948 news item in the *Washington Post* seemed to agree with Byrd, subtly poking fun at the governor for not being conventionally statesmanlike. When the *Grand Ole Opry* granted Tuck an honorary “membership” into their ranks, the *Post* made sure to point out that the membership included “part of a [*Grand Ole Opry*] uniform”: “a loud plaid wool shirt.” This was hardly the uniform of a governor. “Gov. Tuck Granted Honorary Status of ‘Hillbilly,’” *Washington Post*, Oct. 5, 1948, B1.
⁶¹ Joel Garreau, “Gov. Tuck: One Quaint Little Rascal,” *Washington Post*, March 28, 1994, D8. Latimer went on to describe Tuck as “strictly Southside – Halifax County.” “Very homely in his rustic humor. He had several categories of ‘sons of bitches.’ The first was a ‘common son of a bitch.’ Next was a ‘spider-legged son of a bitch.’ Then ‘tiptoeing son of a bitch.’ Finally there was a ‘common, spider-legged, tiptoeing son of a bitch with oak leaf clusters.’”

governor.”⁶² Tuck’s biographer, historian William Crawley, argued that Tuck did not have a true hobby other than the folk music that the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* peddled. “The one diversion in which Tuck regularly indulged was listening to country music. ‘It’s not hillbilly music I like,’ he explained, ‘it’s folk music and sweet old hymns.’”⁶³ Like Mary Workman, Tuck avoided the term “hillbilly” to describe the *Barn Dance* fare he loved, perhaps because of the negative connotations it carried in many quarters. Regardless, he enjoyed the sounds of Jimmie Davis and Roy Acuff, and would occasionally “[swing] his wife around and around to mountain rhythm.”⁶⁴

Tuck’s low-brow taste in entertainment evoked criticism from Capitol Hill’s peanut gallery. The *Richmond News Leader* retroactively described him as “not quite couth – a rough-and-tumble Southside politician, barrel-bellied and black-hatted, who shaved to hillbilly music in the morning and stomped his feet at the Barn Dance on Saturday nights.”⁶⁵ The governor “undeniably enjoyed the company and the customs of the common folk,” which made him an oddity among Virginia’s elite.⁶⁶ For the first half of the twentieth century, there were clear social divides among white men, and the Byrd machine had worked just as tirelessly to maintain class divisions as it had racial segregation. The working white population could be dangerous, and here was the governor cavorting among them as an equal.

⁶² Virginia (Ginger) Workman Stanley, interview by Caroline Morris, March 11, 2010.

⁶³ Crawley, *Bill Tuck*, 52.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶⁵ *Richmond News Leader*, May 4, 1967. As cited in Crawley, *Bill Tuck*, 53.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Tuck did not seem concerned with the sniggers and snide remarks of the chattering classes that orbited Capitol Hill, however, and intensified his support of the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* during his administration. "I often tune in the program of the Old Dominion Barn Dance," he said in 1946, "and find the soothing and uplifting effects a very important factor in enabling me to return to my work with renewed energy."⁶⁷ In 1948, he coronated Workman as the "Queen of the Hillbillies," offering valuable free publicity to the program. Doubtless, he enjoyed the music. But why such a public embrace of it? Looking at the broader political moment, Sunshine Sue and the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* could be useful to a politician like Tuck. But then as now, a politician's message can assume many meanings, depending on the listener.

When Tuck took office in 1946, Harry Byrd wrote: "I think you, the organization and the Democratic party are faced with four very momentous years. We must recognize the fact that there is quite an evolution in progress in all public matters. People are restless and complaining...the whole world is very unsettled."⁶⁸ Byrd was correct; much change had happened over a short period of time and the future seemed "unsettled." White women and African Americans had performed new jobs during the war, and had been better compensated for their work than ever before. Buoyed by New Deal legislation and the massive expansion of wartime industrial manufacturing, unions were as strong as they had ever been. Historians J. Douglas Smith and Pippa Holloway have both

⁶⁷ *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, April 7, 1947. As cited in Crawley, *Bill Tuck*, 53.

⁶⁸ If he referred to it at all, Byrd described his well-oiled political machine as an "organization." Byrd to Tuck, Dec. 8, 1945, William Munford Tuck Papers, 1918-1968, Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA.

pointed out that “lower-middle-class whites increasingly aligned with poor and working-class whites in [the 1920s and beyond], repudiating their loyalty to white elites.”⁶⁹ Many of the divisions between whites were reinforced by wartime experiences, as well as by continued African American protests of Jim Crow. Old systems of prosperity, privilege, and social rank had been heavily revised, if not eliminated altogether by the end of World War II. Byrd was right to see these assaults on traditional authority as a threat, especially to the Organization, which depended on paternalism and patronage. Tuck would preside over a tumultuous period in Virginia’s history, and would have to find a way to keep “the restless and complaining” from overturning the hierarchy of power that Byrd and so many other powerful white men had been building for decades. His challenge would be to maintain “tradition” in Virginia, despite the transformations of modern America.

Mary Workman and the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* became a bridge between Tuck and the restless, an antidote for the “unsettled.” Tuck’s open admiration for the *Barn Dance* may have been genuine, but it was also shrewd. Celebrating the music of the farmers and the working class was a gesture of respect, something the Byrd machine rarely showed those it had intentionally tried to disenfranchise. And by singling out the star of the show – a white career woman – Tuck could potentially hedge against insurrection from another quarter. White women in Virginia were on the move in the late 1940s, and Tuck’s challenge was to work them into the existing system rather than risk attack from

⁶⁹ Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia*, 9. Historian J. Douglas Smith argues that lower-class white Virginians began to question the ability of the wealthiest whites to protect their interests in the first quarter of the twentieth century: “From World War I through the end of the 1920s, it became evident that this genteel paternalism had become increasingly irrelevant in a modern, urban world.” Smith, *Managing White Supremacy*, 5.

outside. Whether he intentionally cultivated the relationship with Sunshine Sue for political gain is not clear, but she proved to be an ambassador between him and white women as well as working people, which undoubtedly proved useful to his political objectives.

Most white women in Virginia had been slow to embrace the cause for women's suffrage in the early twentieth century, and after a promising start, white women's political participation declined.⁷⁰ Historian Elna C. Green argues that despite widespread support for white women's right to vote in Virginia, "woman suffrage and other reforms failed in Virginia because of the power of the Democratic Party, which was backed by the money and assistance of planters, railroads, and industrialists." Green adds, "Thanks to the disfranchisement of poor Virginians, both black and white, the Democratic Party generally got what it wanted in the Progressive Era."⁷¹ In 1924, six women served in the Virginia General Assembly, but the Byrd machine was no friend to women seeking public office and their numbers dwindled rapidly. The machine had opposed the Nineteenth Amendment because "doubling the electorate risked control of the

⁷⁰ It is important to note that while black women were legally enfranchised under the Nineteenth Amendment, Virginia's constitution made it difficult for them to vote. Nevertheless, at least 2,410 black women successfully registered to vote in Richmond in 1920, compared with 2,402 black men. Maggie Lena Walker "visited city hall several times, demanding that more officials be employed to speed up the registration process and reduce the time black women had to stand in line." Green, *Southern Strategies*, 175-176. Green draws her statistics from Suzanne Lebsock, "Woman Suffrage and White Supremacy: A Virginia Case Study," in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, edited by Nancy A. Hewlett and Suzanne Lebsock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

⁷¹ Although the first suffrage organization in Virginia was founded in 1870, it would not be until 1909 that the state had a permanent one. Green points to the rise of cities as a critical catalyst; it was not until the first two decades of the twentieth century that Virginia's cities grew large enough to accommodate a vibrant, stable woman movement. Green, *Southern Strategies*, 175, 155-158. For the best overview of the woman suffrage movement in Virginia, see chapter 7, "The State Suffrage Campaigns: Virginia as a Case Study."

political order.”⁷² Once suffrage passed anyway, the Democrats in charge of Virginia made no efforts to incorporate women, and instead excluded them from the closed-door sessions and informal private meetings that were the boiler rooms of Virginia politics.⁷³ By the end of the Second World War, fewer women served in politics than had in 1924, despite gains made in nearly every other sector of wartime Virginia.

Political activism is not limited, of course, to voting and holding public office. White women of Richmond demonstrated clearly in 1948 that they could and would organize into powerful political blocs if sufficiently invested in a cause such as that of the Richmond Citizens' Association. “Some were women intent, as women usually are, on making a life for their children better than the one they knew,” explained Margaret Hickey of *Ladies Home Journal*. And “some were teachers who see beyond Richmond a state, a country, a world growing better because the people who lived in it were becoming more aware, more informed, more willing to work for the things they believed in.”⁷⁴ The progressive-era rhetoric was familiar, but activism was taking a different form in 1940s Virginia than it had in the 1910s. White women were not forming women's organizations to act as pressure groups; they were taking the lead in organizing men *and* women to directly influence public affairs. Despite the condescension they faced from the political establishment, they were trying to work *within* the system in

⁷² Heinemann, *Harry Byrd of Virginia*, 27,

⁷³ Elna Green argues that, for both white and black Richmonders, “It appeared that women's voluntary associations, and not politics, would continue to be the source of change in the poststratification South.” This was proven true in the Richmond Citizens' Association's efforts to reform municipal government in 1948. Green, *Southern Strategies*, 176.

⁷⁴ Margaret Hickey, “Get Out the Vote'...Reform in Richmond,” *Ladies Home Journal* 65 (June 1948): 23, 178, 180, 181.

1948, and they were a crucial part of the faction that overturned Richmond's municipal government.⁷⁵

Even though entrenched patterns of paternalism largely kept white women out of the General Assembly, there was a state-wide trend of women seeking and gaining local public offices. In June 1948, for example, a small town in Southwest Virginia elected women to every post in the local government: a mayor and five council(wo)men. The *Washington Post* had followed the race and sensationalized it as an "All-Woman Ticket...to Rule Va. Town," but the race had not been a dramatic battle of the sexes.⁷⁶ In a fluff piece analyzing the results, *Post* reporter Herb Little wrote, "come good or bad, the men should keep their peace. Most of them voted for it," which was true.⁷⁷ Clintwood was a small town in a decidedly rural section of Virginia, not even ten miles from the Kentucky border. Change for white women's role in public life was coming quietly and incrementally, but it was undoubtedly coming.

⁷⁵ An urban coalition of middle-class blacks and whites came together in the postwar period to push through a new plan for city government that included a city manager and a nine-member council, the members of which were to be elected at large without primaries. The plan replaced the old city charter which placed most of the power in the hands of the mayor. The goal was to distribute the management of the city among many hands to reduce cronyism and corruption and increase efficiency. Marie Tyler-McGraw notes that the same people who successfully campaigned for municipal reform "reflected the ascendancy of a new, usually urban group of younger men in the state...[who] would emerge as the 'Young Turks,' calling for a more moderate response to integration of the races and relaxation of the Byrd machine's rigid 'pay as you go' financial policies. Embarrassed by Virginia's reputation as a 'political museum piece,' they knew that the state's wealth meant it could afford more libraries, roads, and school expenditures." It would be more accurate to say that the municipal reform movement galvanized activism not just among young, white men, but among all the African American and white men and women who had championed municipal reform as the first step in modernizing the city. Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls*, 283-284.

⁷⁶ "All-Woman Ticket Runs Against Men to Rule Va. Town," *Washington Post*, April 11, 1948, M1.

⁷⁷ In fact, Mayor Minnie "Sis" Miller won by a landslide vote of 264 to 99, indicating overwhelming support from both men and women. Herb Little, "Clintwood Elects Only Women," *Washington Post*, June 27, 1948, B3.

The 1948 Clintwood election was just one of many visible changes to white women's role in politics in the postwar years.⁷⁸ Kathryn H. Stone of Arlington County was elected to the House of Delegates in 1943, the first new woman to join the House since the 1930s. Her election inspired a number of other women to run for state-wide office. Although it took another generation for women to serve in the General Assembly in appreciable numbers, white women were increasingly a constituency that elected officials had to reckon with.⁷⁹ Bill Tuck was no fool. He needed to make sure this growing bloc of politically active white women was an asset to his aspirations, the Organization, and the Democratic Party. At the very least, he needed to avoid making enemies of them.⁸⁰

Even more unsettling to politicians like Tuck than the changing political habits of white women was the shifting position of the working classes in Virginia. When Harry Byrd referred to the "restless and complaining" people, he was probably thinking less of the white women and African Americans who were

⁷⁸ That same year, Falls Church and Vienna both saw the election of one or more women to local council. Neither municipality had had a woman on the city council in a generation. "Light Vote Marks Many Elections in Virginia," *Washington Post*, June 10, 1948, B1.

⁷⁹ According to the *Encyclopedia Virginia*, there was still just one woman serving in the General Assembly in 1970. J. D. McDaid, "Woman Suffrage in Virginia." Retrieved September 29, 2011, from *Encyclopedia Virginia*: http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Woman_Suffrage_in_Virginia.

⁸⁰ The state legislators remained lukewarm to women seeking public office well into the 1970s. But even they realized that some gestures had to be made, which was one reason the General Assembly decided to revisit its opposition to the Nineteenth Amendment, and finally voted to ratify it on Feb. 21, 1952. The gesture was a hollow one, however, because astute political observers knew it had been a smokescreen. Leonard Brown of Alexandria, Virginia, wrote a letter to the *Washington Post* objecting to the belated ratification as a waste of time and an act of hypocrisy. That same legislative session, the General Assembly had refused to pass poll-tax repeal legislation, the sole purpose of the poll tax being to limit the franchise. Leonard Brown, Jr., "Virginia Assembly" [letter to ed.], *Washington Post*, March 14, 1952, 24. On the surface, lawmakers had extended a chivalric hand to [white] women voters. But in reality, they had extended the franchise to absolutely no one; those who were dissuaded from voting by the poll tax continued to be excluded from political process.

challenging old systems of privilege, and instead worrying about an impending collision between the forces of conservatism and organized labor in Virginia. Byrd, and therefore the Organization, had never been comfortable with the New Deal philosophically, and were especially wary of unionization.⁸¹ Ever since the tumultuous reorganization of politics and labor after the end of Reconstruction, the Democratic Party in Virginia had taken great pains to racially divide Virginia's working classes, lest a biracial political party ever gain control of the state again.⁸² While unions were often racially segregated in 1940s Virginia, they were not always. And even more alarming, the numbers of people – black and white – streaming into cities from the countryside threatened to overwhelm the boundaries of carefully designated neighborhoods for whites and for African Americans. What if the migrant newcomers felt more in common with fellow migrants, regardless of race, than with other urban blacks and whites? Working-class Virginians significantly outnumbered the political elite and could easily unseat them if given the proper moment and motivation, which the postwar years seemed to be providing.

The Byrd machine had always had a somewhat uneasy relationship with the white working class. An historian who was Tuck's and Byrd's contemporary referred to the Organization as a "gentlemen's machine," to differentiate it from the big-city machines run by immigrants and up-and-comers.⁸³ Byrd's machine

⁸¹ Harry Byrd had campaigned for the governorship in 1925 partly on his "pay-as-you-go" philosophy, which prohibited deficit spending of any kind.

⁸² See the introduction for a lengthy historical background on the Readjusters and the legal apparatus that the Democratic Party created to prevent a similar biracial coalition from ever reforming.

⁸³ Marshall Fishwick, *A New Look at the Old Dominion* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 252.

relied upon a powerful, elite social network, rather than lucrative contracts, a building like Tammany Hall, or a fleet of operatives. Rather, the machine existed through words and handshakes, over sherries and private dinners. When put to it, Byrd described the network as “a loose organization of friends, who believe in the same principles of government.”⁸⁴ The walls of Virginia’s Democratic Party were girded by friendship, but friendship was anything but democratic in this sense. Although many white middle-class Virginians, like Calvin Lucy and Walter Bishop, courted the favor of the Byrd machine, they could only do so from the periphery. Membership was limited to wealthy white men, most of whom had been educated at the University of Virginia or the College of William and Mary, and introduced to public life by their fathers. Those who had neither the means nor the social rank to move in such exalted circles were excluded from the greatest of the benefits the machine could offer. A majority of white Virginians failed to meet such strict standards, so what reason did they have to tolerate the Organization? Or perhaps more critically, why did they not use numbers to overwhelm it?

Many historians have pointed to relatively low numbers of voters as a significant reason for the machine’s longevity. All women were excluded from suffrage until 1920 of course, and white women did not vote in large numbers for many decades after passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. African American men and women, though technically eligible to vote, met any number of obstacles that effectively disfranchised the vast majority of them. It comes as no surprise that white women and black Virginians were not active members of the

⁸⁴ Crawley, *Bill Tuck*, 9.

early-twentieth-century electorate, but one of the less remarked-upon consequences of the institution of the poll tax was the exclusion of a significant number of working-class white men from the franchise. In 1946, historian Robert Meade published a four-part series of articles in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, exploring the dimensions of the Virginia electorate. He found that “A good many white Virginians think that voting is something only for the elite, the ‘quality folk.’”⁸⁵ Whether because of the poll tax or an inherited feeling of deference, Virginia’s working white people rarely voted.⁸⁶ When Tuck himself was elected, out of a potential voting population of 1,790,694, only 168,764 voted (9.4%).⁸⁷ With such a narrow section of the population voting, machine politicians needed only cater to the interests of a few while offering conciliatory gestures to the many. As far as machines go, it was fairly straightforward and inexpensive.

Historian William Crawley has argued that the rural classes, isolated by culture and education, were wedded to the past just as much as Byrd was, and that was enough to secure their tolerance and perhaps even passive support for a political system purporting to guard tradition.⁸⁸ Virginia farmers, for example, may not have closely followed the political circus in Richmond. But they would have been all-too-aware of the encroachments of modernity in the 1930s and

⁸⁵ Robert D. Meade, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 31, May 12, July 7, and Aug. 4, 1946.

⁸⁶ Though Meade’s language implies that poor white men were not interested in voting, there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. In *Blue Laws and Black Codes*, historian Peter Wallenstein cites a white Republican from western Virginia in the 1920s: “It was painful and pitiful to see the horror and dread visible on the faces of the illiterate poor white men’ as they waited ‘to take their turn before the inquisition’ that would determine whether they were permitted to register and retain their status as voters. ‘Still more horrible’ was it, he said, ‘to see the mark of humiliation and despair that were stamped on the faces of honest but poor white men who had been refused registration and who had been robbed of their citizenship without cause.’” William C. Pendleton, *Political History of Appalachian Virginia* (Dayton, Va., 1927). Cited by Wallenstein, *Blue Laws and Black Codes*, 8.

⁸⁷ Office of the Registrar, Commonwealth of Virginia, 1945. Cited by Crawley, *Bill Tuck*, 75.

⁸⁸ Crawley, *Bill Tuck*, 11-13.

1940s, as their daughters wore less clothing and talked about college, as whiskey returned with the repeal of Prohibition, and as New Deal regulators and farm equipment manufacturers “taught” them to farm scientifically, or paid them not to plant corn at all. It is likely that, even if they did not want to prevent progress, their sensibilities yearned for tradition. The “Organization” may not have represented the interests of the “little people,” but it *did* represent tradition.

Of course, Byrd and his associates were not taking chances with the loyalty of humble whites. Peter Wallenstein has argued that Virginia’s governing elite paired mechanisms of legal disenfranchisement with a broader campaign for social control. Laws that prohibited Virginians from pursuing public forms of entertainment on Sundays, for example, went on the books in the early twentieth century at the same time that a “counterrevolution...targeted black Virginians for political neutralization,” which ultimately targeted poor white men as well.⁸⁹ Additionally, Pippa Holloway has argued that the “blue laws,” like the Sunday-closing law, were designed specifically to police borders of class and race by regulating sexuality and other personal choices that had traditionally been beyond the reach of the law.⁹⁰ Surveying legislative trends in the aggregate, between the blue laws and the poll taxes, it becomes clear that Virginia’s governing elite was fighting a war on many fronts to curtail any political or cultural authority that poor whites or African Americans might claim. To the

⁸⁹ Wallenstein, *Blue Laws and Black Codes*, 7. See Chap. 2, “Necessity, Charity, and a Sabbath: Citizens, Courts, and Sunday Closing Laws, 1920s-1980s.”

⁹⁰ Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia*. See her introduction, in which she describes “fear of the transgression of boundaries” generally, and in Virginia in particular.

establishment's way of thinking, the containment of these two groups was absolutely essential to maintain control over the state's political culture.

Despite decades of systemic efforts at policing and disenfranchising, Virginia's lawmakers found themselves on unstable ground with the white working class in the late 1940s. There were many symptoms of eroding deference, including the successful challenge of blue laws during the war years and beyond, but matters reached a critical point early in Tuck's administration when the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers threatened a strike of the Virginia Electric and Power Company (VEPCO) in the late winter of 1946. VEPCO supplied over half of all Virginians with electricity, and Tuck viewed the threat of a strike as scurrilous and indecent. When it became clear that VEPCO would not budge on the union's proposed wage increase, and the union would not budge without it, Tuck announced: "I shall not sit idly by and do nothing in the face of such a disaster." He warned the union that he would have the Commonwealth seize the plant and run it itself to prevent all the "attendant evils" that a strike would bring.⁹¹ Most Virginia newspapers cheered the governor on.

His response to the strike was not surprising, given his first address to the General Assembly as governor two months earlier. "Unionization of the public service...diverts loyalty, allegiance and obligations of the employee from the people and their government, which are entitled to them, and transfers them to

⁹¹ Official statement by Tuck, March 2, 1946, Tuck Executive Papers, Virginia, *Opinions of the Attorney General and Report to the Governor of Virginia, from July 1, 1945, to June 30, 1946* (Richmond: Division of Purchase and Printing, 1946): 145. Cited by Crawley, *Bill Tuck*.

the union” he had thundered to a “solid burst of handclapping.”⁹² Tuck had come into office determined to prevent the “restless and complaining” from destabilizing the state, and his first order of business was to suppress the strength of unions, as the VEPCO strikers were finding out.

With the strike deadline looming, Tuck took the extraordinary measure of drafting all VEPCO employees into the Virginia National Guard, so that he could order them to work and court-martial them if they refused.⁹³ His actions reverberated around the country, bolstering the anti-union forces that were chipping away at New Deal gains for organized labor. To many observers, it seemed like a case of bluff and double-bluff between the union and the governor, and there was national interest in the outcome.⁹⁴ When the IBEW leaders agreed to suspend the strike while union and management hammered out a deal, Tuck declared a victory. The lights never went off in Virginia and Tuck now had a vivid example of the “evils” of unionization to protect a fledgling “right-to-work” law, which the General Assembly passed in that winter of 1946. Organized labor in Virginia, never all that strong anyway, had just been dealt a major blow.

So why would Governor Tuck then turn around in the fall of 1946 and embrace the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, a program that clearly catered to and celebrated white working-class culture? To do so seemed to violate every effort to censor, prohibit, or otherwise regulate pastimes that the General Assembly

⁹² Virginia, *Address of William M. Tuck, Governor, to the General Assembly, Monday, January 21, 1946*, Senate Document NO. 16 (Richmond: Division of Purchase and Printing, 1946), 9; Crawley, *Bill Tuck*, 84. Citing the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Jan. 22, 1946.

⁹³ “Calling Out Guard Cost Va., \$20,000,” *The Free-Lance Star*, April 24, 1946, 1.

⁹⁴ See “State May Act in Event of VEPCO Strike,” *Washington Post*, March 21, 1946, 3; “Tuck to Seize VEPCO if Union Strikes,” *Washington Post*, March 23, 1946, 1; “Actions Halts Shutdown between Va. and Union; Four-Man Board to Study Retroactive Pay; Tuck’s ‘Draft’ Threat is Attacked,” *Washington Post*, March 31, 1946), 1.

had supported for the past four decades. And yet, Tuck had a standing reservation at the *Barn Dance*, and frequently brought over his VIP dinner companions. In 1970, Mary Workman told an interviewer that she always thought the VIPs might have liked the opera better, but Tuck would have none of it.⁹⁵ The *Barn Dance* it was, and Tuck was markedly unapologetic about his love for it, claiming it was “the best dance music in the world...It carries you out into the hills among the people who appreciate the real values of life – people who know nothing of sham and pretense.”⁹⁶

Tuck probably genuinely enjoyed hillbilly music (though he would have called it “country” or “folk”), but his outspoken support of the *Barn Dance* hints at another purpose. In the aftermath of the VEPCO standoff and the passage of a right-to-work law, perhaps Tuck was wise enough to see the potential for a backlash. Yes, organized labor seemed to have more enemies than friends in Virginia in 1946, but Tuck’s use of the Virginia National Guard to forcibly draft VEPCO workers had not sat well with everyone, especially former GIs who were not keen to be conscripted all over again. Even Harry Byrd was surprised and wary of such a use of power, though this could have been because he felt it was too much of a gamble rather than an unpardonable breach of executive authority.⁹⁷ Tuck had ceded no ground to organized labor on Capitol Hill, but the Lyric Theatre was another battleground altogether. By clapping his hands and stomping his feet along with the rest of the crowd, he publicly embraced music that celebrated hard-working white folks. It is not unlikely that the politician

⁹⁵ “Sunshine Sue Changes Her Tune,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Nov. 9, 1970, B1.

⁹⁶ As cited by Crawley, *Bill Tuck*, 53.

⁹⁷ Crawley, *Bill Tuck*, 126.

hoped the hard-working white folks in attendance would think he was embracing them, too, despite his recent actions to curtail their rights to organize.

The *Barn Dance* was a wise choice for the governor, if cross-class healing among whites was his goal. After all, in his own words the *Barn Dance* celebrated “people who appreciate the real values in life,” a familiar euphemism for farming or mountain people. Western Virginia was undoubtedly the most impoverished part of the state, but the hillbilly philosophy held that the [white] people who had the fewest material possessions and lived closest to the land were the guardians of something pure and distinctly American.⁹⁸ Tuck could publicly acknowledge the dignity of working people while at the Lyric Theatre, which only reinforced his argument that organized labor benefited outside radicals rather than Virginia’s actual workers. These are the *good* poor people, he seemed to be saying. They only need their values, not some rabble-rousing labor organizer.

In one sense, Tuck was bringing the hammer down on Virginia’s working class – black and white – by criminalizing one of their best strategies to oppose a political and economic order that had every other advantage over them. But in another sense, Tuck was reversing policy by yielding to Virginia’s white “plain people” in the cultural arena. It was a small gesture, but one whose symbolism would not have been lost on the thousands of people who listened to the *Old*

⁹⁸ Anthony Harkins argues that “despite their poverty, ignorance, primitiveness, and isolation, ‘hillbillies’ were ‘one hundred percent’ Protestant Americans of supposedly pure Anglo-Saxon or at least Scotch-Irish lineage.” In fact, the poverty was a critical factor in the “hillbillies” capacity for resisting the changes of industrial America. Their lack of worldly knowledge and materials made them uniquely qualified to be “a potential salvation for a nation threatened by non-Protestant invasions as well as the enervating forces of mass industrialization and bureaucracy.” Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7-8.

Dominion Barn Dance every weekend. The Virginia General Assembly had restricted their right to vote, to organize, and to bargain collectively, but Governor Tuck was *culturally* enfranchising the white working class every time he brought VIPs to his standing box in the Lyric Theatre.

Despite outward appearances, the Byrd machine and the “deliberate cult of the past” that sustained it, was under attack.⁹⁹ Tuck had done well in public life not because of his formal training or academic achievements, but because of his grasp of political reality, human nature, and the power inherent in networks of white men with a common purpose. To bridge the gap between the “gentlemen’s machine” and the serfs who were uncomfortable with the feudal arrangement, he did not need a political treaty or Constitutional convention. He needed some old-time gospel music and cornball jokes.

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1948 was a turning point in Virginia’s history, the moment where “tradition” was an unclear directive, and the argument “because it’s always been this way” was fast losing steam. In 1948, Virginia stood uncertainly, seemingly a hairs-breadth away from deprioritizing the “cult of the past” in favor of social and political innovation. Richmond’s municipal government had been overturned and reformed by a biracial group of middle-class citizens. Oliver Hill had become the city’s first African American councilman. White women were seeking and sometimes obtaining public office elsewhere in the state. If Virginia truly were “the gateway to the growing South,” as the Chamber of Commerce suggested,

⁹⁹ “Deliberate cult” quotation from Douglas S. Freeman. See *Virginia: A Guide to the Old Dominion*, compiled by the Writer’s Program of the Works Progress Administration (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940).

Virginians appeared to be quietly walking away from the Old South toward something newer, more inclusive. Mary Workman, Bill Tuck, and the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, each of whom had a stage on Capitol Hill, became players in the drama of a region on the brink of massive transformation.

At the same moment that “restless and complaining” Virginians seemed poised to force major revision of the pathways of power in the Commonwealth, Governor Tuck made Sunshine Sue a queen. In the spring of 1948, Governor Tuck proclaimed Workman to be the “Queen of the Hillbillies,” thereby officially wedding Virginia’s politics and entertainment on Capitol Hill. The gesture was meant as a compliment to the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* and especially to Mary Workman, but it carried significant weight in a changing political culture, and signaled the intractable gains that working-class Virginians and white women had made.

When asked about becoming “Queen of the Hillbillies,” Workman replied, “I think it was his [Tuck’s] own idea, but the name stuck.”¹⁰⁰ Workman usually did not describe herself as a hillbilly, and may not have been thrilled about the governor’s choice of language. After all, the term “hillbilly” was associated with laziness, ignorance, and even criminal behavior. Tuck’s use of the term “hillbilly” – given his own insistence on calling it “country music” – indicated Tuck’s awareness of his audience, and could have been a calculated effort to court working-class white Virginians, whose allegiance to the “Organization” was slipping. Tuck did not express his enthusiasm for the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* in racialized tones, but his use of the word “hillbilly” signaled his understanding

¹⁰⁰ “Sunshine Sue Changes Her Tune,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Nov. 9, 1970, B1.

that although the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* represented all working-class culture in a sense, it showcased only *white* working-class characters. He could have designated Workman as “Queen of Country Music” or “Queen of the Barn Dance,” but he chose a term that carried well-known racialized and class-based freight.

I have found no letters to the editor, or personal correspondence, to indicate what listeners and observers thought of Tuck’s decision to coronate Sunshine Sue. Nor did Workman ever reveal her feelings on the matter, preferring to reminisce about the incident without analyzing it one way or the other. But the proclamation undeniably empowered Sunshine Sue, and Mary Workman, at a moment when white career women were at a crossroads. Postwar Americans, and certainly Richmonders, had begun to show an antipathy to career women. But here was Sunshine Sue, a queen among career women, with the governor’s own approval. The General Assembly may have had only one female representative in 1948, but Capitol Hill’s only monarch was a woman. The conflicting messages indicated the limits of “tradition” in setting the tone for postwar Richmond and Virginia. And since the ruling elite had staked its claim to power on the protection and perpetuation of “tradition,” the existence of even a minor contradiction weakened it significantly.

The *Old Dominion Barn Dance* spun images of first loves, sainted mothers, and life on the farm. The program’s contribution to national identity was incalculable:

These songs preserve the dramatic moments of frontier living...These are the songs and airs which had made America what it is today. These are

the songs which have sunk into our soil to emerge in the walk of our men and the way our women toss their heads.¹⁰¹

The hillbilly performers of the *Barn Dance* were preservationists and archivists, identifying, inventorying, and sharing memories that were essential to sustaining quintessentially American values like individualism, perseverance, and loyalty to family. When Sunshine Sue put a flower in her hair and told the audience to kick off their shoes, she was inviting them into a sacred circle of tradition, where time and modern concerns were suspended.

On the surface, the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* and Virginia's mid-century political actors had much in common: both were trying to preserve and celebrate a particular memory of the past in the face of sweeping change. By day, Governor Tuck led the forces of conservatism from his position on Capitol Hill, sometimes performing with a supporting cast of elected officials next door in the General Assembly. On evenings and weekends, Sunshine Sue was Capitol Hill's main attraction, the leading lady without a leading man. And her cast of characters included people with names like "Grandpa Jones," "Curley Collins," and "Sugarfoot," who were probably more familiar to the average Virginian than the delegates who represented them. The governor and the General Assembly curtailed the power of unions, and the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* praised the dignity of the man who works with his hands. On the one hand, the poll tax succeeded in dissuading working folks from voting, but on the other hand working folks were coming to Capitol Hill in droves on Saturday night to clap and

¹⁰¹ Horace Reynolds, "Old Tunes Evoke Historic Memories: Music and Verse Help the Nation Recover More Knowledge of Its History," *Christian Science Monitor*, mag. section (Oct. 23, 1948): 8-9.

sing with the *Barn Dance* cast. The *Old Dominion Barn Dance* and the state legislators may both have distributed images of the past, but those images had contradictory messages for the present.

In the years immediately after the Second World War, Virginia's state legislature was much the same as it had been in the early twentieth century. But African Americans, white women, and the working class had steadily begun to destabilize complex social and racial hierarchy that sustained the Byrd machine. The popularity of the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, with its subversive Femcee and fare for "plain people," illustrates the degree to which "tradition" was malleable to the point of unpredictability. The *Barn Dance* sold "tradition" as a form of escape and celebration. The same people who eagerly bought tickets no longer necessarily bought into decades-old notions of deference and paternalism that the "Organization" peddled. If a career woman could become queen, and if hillbillies could become friends with the governor, what else could be revised? The history of the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* suggests that Virginians were using the cultural space created by a radio station to explore alternatives to the path before them. On the stage of the Lyric Theatre, performers implicitly and explicitly challenged social norms that were supposedly at the very core of white southern identity. And once space had been created for reimagining gender and class norms, people began publicly challenging racial norms as well, which is precisely what would ultimately happen on WRVA's airwaves beginning in the mid-1950s.

Mary Workman did not seek to introduce or shape legislation. There is no evidence that she became politically engaged at all. But there she sat on her throne on Capitol Hill, and while the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* was not revolutionary, it became part of a broad, quiet movement to revise the pathways to social and political opportunity for working-class Virginians of all races.

Chapter 6 Civil Rights on the Air

News programming presented a singularly difficult challenge for WRVA in the 1950s and 1960s. WRVA managers and employees were not only witnesses to the struggles over desegregation; some of them were also personally involved in “massive resistance.” African American persistence in demanding civil rights in 1950s Virginia forced WRVA officials to reconcile personal allegiances to the conservative Democrats with an obligation and a desire to provide news coverage that upheld industry standards of fairness and fulfilled the station’s commitment to “public service.” Over the course of the twenty years after the end of the Second World War, WRVA would undergo a profound shift in the content, approach, and tone of its expanding list of news programs. African American listeners in particular pressured the station both implicitly and explicitly to open the door for reasoned debate, and WRVA gradually and reluctantly moved toward more openness and more inclusion in its coverage of civil rights battles.

Although WRVA managers and the editors of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and *Richmond News Leader* had much in common – they were mostly all middle- and upper-class white men from the area – the inherent differences between print media and broadcast media meant that WRVA’s treatment of news in general, and its treatment of news about civil rights efforts in particular, would develop on a different trajectory than the narratives in the white press. The first

part of this chapter addresses WRVA's tentative experiments with "new" news in the late 1940s and early 1950s, placing them within the larger context of local white media. Longstanding commitments to national network broadcasting, as well as the large role that black listeners and the *Negro Church Services* played at the station, forced WRVA news broadcasters to confront complexities within Virginia's and the nation's political climate that they might otherwise have overlooked or ignored.

By the mid to late 1950s, WRVA shifted its policies of newscasting to privilege *conversation* and *analysis* over straight reporting, launching new shows such as *Sideviews on the News* and *Open for Opinion*. The new hybrid entertainment/news show, as well as interactive news programming, ensured that WRVA news would always account for multiple perspectives, and would always have room for revision and negotiation, however flawed. Because of listener pressure and the station officials' revised understandings of what "public service" required in the 1950s and 1960s, WRVA broadcasters ultimately engaged with the civil rights movement both as opponents and enablers of desegregation. WRVA, a radio station that had been firmly part of the Byrd machine at conception, created the space for a relatively open discourse that eroded the foundations of institutionalized race- and class-based privilege in Virginia.

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When Virginia became a prominent legal battleground for school desegregation in the 1950s, the debate absorbed everyone: parents, lawyers,

politicians, journalists, and of course WRVA employees.¹ The tense and often heated discussion over school desegregation illustrated the hopes and fears of Virginia's citizens, and dredged up deep-seated frustrations and anxieties that had been building for several decades. Black Virginians had been pushing back against legalized discrimination for more than half a century, and their successes had steadily chipped away at institutional inequality in Virginia by the 1950s, but had not overturned the legal justification for "separate but equal" that was at the heart of the Jim Crow laws.² White Virginians had a variety of reactions to the school desegregation cases that ranged from lukewarm support to resigned acceptance to outrage.³ Reaction to *Brown* was about more than school desegregation, of course. Black and white Virginians both saw the ruling as an important indicator of the state's and country's future, as well as a consequence of social transformations that had begun decades earlier. Richmond's black community hailed the ruling as an Independence Day. Robert Johnson, a history professor at the historically black Virginia Union University explained, "a lot of us haven't been breathing for the past nine months. But today the students reacted as if a heavy burden had been lifted from their shoulders. They see a new world

¹ The NAACP, the organization at the front of the campaign for school desegregation, filed more lawsuits in Virginia than in any other state, turning the Commonwealth into ground zero for the legal assault on "separate but equal." Robert A. Pratt, *The Color of Their Skin: Education and Race in Richmond, Virginia, 1954-1989* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 8.

² Organizations such as the Virginia Negro Women's League of Voters and Richmond's branch of the National Colored Republican Women offered Richmond's black women opportunities to influence public policy through steady, institutional pressure on the city and state government. Green, *Southern Strategies*, 176. The Independent League, formed in the 1880s, pooled the resources of several "hidden" donors to subsidize Richmond's leading black newspaper, the *Planet*, and minimize political reprisal. Under editor John Mitchell's leadership, the *Planet* would be an important voice of protest in the early twentieth century. Ann Field Alexander, *Race Man: The Rise and Fall of the "Fighting Editor" John Mitchell, Jr.* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 29-30.

³ The most comprehensive exploration of divisions within white reaction to *Brown* in Virginia is Matthew D. Lassiter and Andrew B. Lewis, eds., *The Moderates' Dilemma: Massive Resistance to School Desegregation in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998).

opening up for them and those that follow them.”⁴ The white response to *Brown* in 1954 was neither monolithic nor consistent from one day to the next, but the discourse that emerged in the white Richmond press, which was also articulated in WRVA workplace correspondence, betrayed a profound sense of uncertainty among white men who feared they were losing their position of authority in business, politics, and society.

Generally speaking, officials and employees at WRVA disliked the notion of desegregation, and seemed sympathetic to anti-desegregationists.⁵ When the Supreme Court ruled on *Brown* on May 17, 1954, Calvin Lucy was a year into his tenure as Vice-President in charge of Radio-Television for Larus and Brother Company, a position created for him.⁶ As WRVA station manager for almost thirty years, Lucy had brushed up against governors, judges, and legislators his entire career. He was familiar with the machinations of power in mid-century Virginia and had courted acceptance among the Commonwealth’s movers and shakers, the vast majority of whom were white men of means. When Garland Gray, Thomas Stanley, and Harry Byrd began talking about ways to mitigate the ruling’s consequences, or avoid them altogether, Lucy was galvanized into activism. Within months of the passage of *Brown II*, which attempted to offer

⁴ *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, May 18, 1954. As cited in Pratt, *The Color of Their Skin*, 3.

⁵ The vast majority of WRVA’s employees were white, and all managers were men with the exception of Bertha Hewlett. The station’s “porters,” African American men employed to run errands and maintain the facilities, were the only people of color to work at the station in the 1940s and 1950s, as far as I can tell from personnel files. (Free-lance entertainers, many of whom were African American, were not considered station employees.) In his employee rolls, Calvin T. Lucy arranged staff by race, age, and marital status. In 1938, Lucy listed only three men, William Henderson, James Polk, and Leroy Scott as “colored.” Employee Roll, Oct., 16, 1940, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁶ WRVA Press Release, Sept. 21, 1953, LVA: WRVA Radio. Although an executive in the company, Lucy also retained the title of “station manager” for WRVA until 1956 when he passed the reins to Barron Howard. WRVA-Radio Promotion Department, “Biographical Information [CTL],” LVA: WRVA Radio.

states lawful conditions for negotiating “complexities arising from the transition to a system of public education freed of racial discrimination,” Lucy was giving money to the Prince Edward Educational Corporation.⁷ Lucy had often donated to political campaigns, a diplomatic and perhaps necessary move for any ambitious white businessman in Virginia, but Lucy’s opposition to *Brown* went a step beyond donating to Harry Byrd’s coffers. Instead of financially supporting a powerful individual to represent him, Lucy sent money directly to private citizens organizing against desegregation.

Prince Edward County Public Schools had been named in the original *Brown v. Board* case, and the 1954 and 1955 *Brown* rulings required the school district to desegregate. As Prince Edward’s all-white School Board deliberated the school system’s course of action in the summer of 1955, Lucy wrote to the Prince Edward Educational Corporation, offering his sympathy and financial support. He received a form letter from the treasurer, “on behalf of the Prince Edward Educational Corporation, and all other right-thinking citizens of this State,” thanking him for his contribution, which would support the Corporation’s resolution to make “every effort to assure some sort of segregated education for our White children this Fall.”⁸ The Prince Edward Educational Corporation, later named the Prince Edward School Foundation, intended to use donations to establish private schools for white students who did not wish to share classrooms

⁷ *Brown v. Board of Education*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955); issued May 31, 1955.

⁸ Prince Edward Education Foundation to CTL, July 19, 1955, VCU: Lucy Papers. In August of the same year, Lucy received another letter from the group, claiming “We do not know what the future holds for us here in Prince Edward County, nor for any other White person in Virginia. We only know that here in our county, backed by people such as you, we will never submit to integration in our schools.” Prince Edward Education Foundation to CTL, August 1955, VCU: Lucy Papers.

with students of color. When the school board elected to close the public school system in 1959 rather than desegregate, thanks to donations from Lucy and like-minded individuals, the Prince Edward School Foundation had enough resources to launch a private school system.⁹ Lucy continued to give money to the Foundation as late as 1966.¹⁰

Lucy did not stand alone among his colleagues at WRVA as a staunch opponent of desegregation; nor was he the only employee to openly express loyalty to Byrd during the period of “massive resistance” when the senator stoked the fires of white racism to roll back token desegregation. In Spring 1957, Public Relations Director Walter R. Bishop took his young daughter for a trip to Washington, D.C. As part of their sightseeing tour, the pair dropped by Byrd’s office on Capitol Hill. The senator was unavailable, but Bishop followed up with a letter exhorting the senator to “let us know whenever this station, or myself personally, can do anything for you.” Bishop was proud enough of Byrd’s generic response to the letter (“I value your friendship more than I can express”), that he shared it with Lucy, who was likewise thrilled.¹¹

⁹ Although the Prince Edward School Foundation did not realize its goal of providing a tuition-free private school system for whites until 1959, “several whites interviewed in the county suggested that private schools for white children had long been a dream of white segregationist leaders.” J. Kenneth Morland, “Tragedy of Public Schools: Prince Edward County, Virginia: A Report for the Virginia Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights,” Jan. 16, 1964: 18. A near-final draft of the report can be found in Edward H. Peeples, Prince Edward County (Va.) Public Schools Collection, James Branch Cabell Library, Special Collections and Archives, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia. Hereafter cited as VCU: Peeples Collection.

¹⁰ Lucy sent the Prince Edward School Foundation \$25 in February of 1966. I found no record of any donations after this year. VCU: Lucy papers.

¹¹ WRB to Harry F. Byrd, Sr., Washington D.C., April 18, 1957, UVA: WRVA Radio. Like Lucy, Bishop also reached out to Harry Byrd, Jr., as the elder Byrd moved closer to retirement. He sent Byrd, Jr., unsolicited transcripts of addresses given by Byrd’s forbears on WRVA, and told him frankly “We want to elect you Governor in 1969.” As it turned out, 1969 proved to be the year the

Lucy and Bishop did not speak for all WRVA employees, and the records do not indicate whether any others sent donations to segregationist organizations, or dropped in to visit the senator in Washington. Though opinions on desegregation and eventually on “massive resistance” undoubtedly varied widely from person to person at WRVA in the mid- to late 1950s, informal workplace communications give a general impression of hostility and victimization among the white employees. Racially charged humor was commonplace at WRVA – and probably in just about every other workplace in the mid-century South – but it is rare to find tangible evidence of it.¹² In unguarded moments, outside of the administration of daily duties, WRVA officials betrayed their understandings and opinions on race and race relations through office jokes that they passed around among themselves.¹³

Democratic Party in Virginia lost control of the Governor's Mansion for the first time since 1886. WRB to Harry F. Byrd, Jr., Winchester, Feb. 14, 1963, UVA: WRVA Radio.

¹² Humor often defies academic investigation. The elements of a joke that appeal most to an audience often depend on contemporary circumstances, delivery, and implicit understandings of a common culture between the audience and the jokester -- all of which a historian can recreate only imperfectly. But historical humor, despite its challenges to the researcher, also offers a glimpse of beliefs and assumptions that are rarely articulated directly in the other sources available to us. In his article “American Humor,” Arthur Power Dudden argued that American humor “attacks society's follies and fools indiscriminately, revealing in the process those shadowy highlights and lowlights between pretensions and achievements.” Drawing on the work of Jesse Bier, Dudden also argued that a fundamental tension in American humor is one of conformity versus pluralism. Because the citizenry of the United States lacks conformity – of race, of religion, of purpose – humor often imposes, or lampoons the proposal of consensus on American people and culture. Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson made a similar argument in “Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival” when they claimed “ethnic humor in the United States originated as a function of social class feelings of superiority and white racial antagonisms, and expresses the continuing resistance of advantaged groups to unrestrained immigration and to emancipation's black subcitizens barred from opportunities for participation and productivity.” Boskin and Dorinson argued further that, once articulated, ethnic humor could be reinterpreted and repackaged to turn the victim into the joker, and the joker into the butt. Arthur Power Dudden, “American Humor,” *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 7-12, 9; Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson, “Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival,” *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 81-97.

¹³ A quick note on my sources: the written documents I have identified as “jokes” were found scattered through the personal papers of Calvin T. Lucy, the work papers of Director of Public Relations Walter R. Bishop, and the station's files that were donated to the Library of Virginia in

When WRVA officials joked about race and racial difference, they tended to ridicule proponents or instruments of change rather than the desire for change. In the late 1950s, Lucy sent a letter entitled "Confused" to six of his directors "and any others you think may enjoy this." Written in the style of a letter to the editor, the white author satirizes the implementation of desegregation, fretting that the "law of the land" will come down on him for having white oaks in his front yard and black oaks in his back yard. "I didn't plant them," he writes, "They just came up that way." He also asks what to call chiggers, since "the *Time* reports seem to think this [name] may damage their little personalities," a clear reference to testimony of African American psychologists that Jim Crow was psychologically damaging to African Americans, especially children.¹⁴ The satirical letter ends with a postscript: "In a crisis like this, shouldn't we keep our sense of humor?"¹⁵ The humor of the joke lies in the audience's belief that removing legal and social barriers between the races is as ridiculous as requiring white pigeons and black birds to live in the same tree, or having paratroopers forcibly integrate peas in a vegetable patch. The joke implies that desegregation is both biologically

2000. The jokes range from the inter-office memo, carefully sent to and signed by multiple recipients, to personal correspondence sent from someone outside the station, to typewritten jokes of indeterminate origin and audience. Some of the jokes were filed intentionally, others made it into the archives sandwiched between more official documents. Patterns that emerged despite the sheer randomness of the materials are therefore, I believe, representative of the general opinions and beliefs of a generation of WRVA officials.

¹⁴ Educational psychologists Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark famously presented the results of their "doll studies" to the Supreme Court during the *Brown v. Board* trial, in which "black children, when given choices, consistently preferred white dolls over brown ones." Though their testimony provoked derision and much criticism from *Brown's* opponents, "psychologists widely interpreted the results as an indication that segregation is psychologically damaging." Karen Kersting, "The Case Against Segregation: *Brown* Contributor Clark Looks Back," *Monitor on Psychology: American Psychiatric Association*, 35, no. 8 (Sept. 2004): 58.

¹⁵ "Confused," inter-office memo, CTL to Howard, Carey, Stone, Terry, Woods, Clark [Sept. 30, 1957], VCU: Lucy Papers.

“unnatural,” and potentially violent. According to that logic, any efforts to maintain the status quo were a defense against chaos and conflict.

Most of the jokes betray an acute sense of victimization, as though integration was a ludicrous punishment being handed down to whites who had been minding their own business. A “glossary” in the public relations department files, circulated as a gag, defined a reactionary as “one who believes that the good in our established form of government should not be discarded until something better is found to take its place; or one who believes constitutional government is preferable to communism.” The same glossary defined a bigot or demagogue as “a person who is not color blind. He refuses to ignore the fact that there are more than one race [sic] in the world today, and recognizes the fact that the Almighty endowed the birds with enough sense to associate with their kind. He still believes that a man should exercise as much discretion as a bird.”¹⁶ The glossary’s implication was that [white] people labeled as “reactionaries” or “bigots or demagogues” were the only sane people left in a world gone mad.

While humor often disarms anger or anxiety, it also keeps debates and controversies alive. It was a short step from a satirical interoffice memo to the reactionary, dead-serious, segregationist literature that flooded Virginia in *Brown’s* wake. Both the letter from “Confused” and the “glossary” painted segregation as humankind’s “natural” state, while desegregation efforts were ridiculous and “unnatural.” Segregationist literature from the era made a similar

¹⁶ A humorous political glossary, allegedly composed by Virginia Delegate Lucas D. Phillips. In contrast to the bigot, demagogue, or reactionary, the glossary defined the liberal as one who “does not stand for anything; he falls for every socialistic panacea which comes along regardless of the damage it does to our established form of government and institutions.” Lucas D. Phillips, “Glossary,” UVA: WRVA Radio.

argument, though without the brevity of humor. “No decent person, I know, hates Negroes,” claimed Gerald L.K. Smith in *White Men Awaken!*, in an undated pamphlet from Bishop’s files. “The real hatemonger, the real breeders of hate, are the people who are forcing the situation.”¹⁷ While the officeplace jokes were not intended as a call to arms for segregationists, they contributed to the impression that white southern men were the victims of a dangerous social experiment. Segregationist literature, and eventually the firebrand rhetoric of “massive resistance,” manipulated feelings of victimhood into active, organized rebellion.

The white men trading memos and jokes in WRVA’s studios and back offices expressed confusion, anxiety, and occasionally anger about efforts to desegregate the Jim Crow South. At least a couple of them – the station manager and the public relations director – turned their confusion into conservative activism, assisting the standard-bearers of “massive resistance.” Unlike the late William Reed, however, these men were not in Byrd’s inner circle. WRVA employees were on the periphery of Virginia’s power-brokers, but because of the mass medium they controlled, they were the gatekeepers between the most powerful men in Virginia and the masses. They relished this position, and as Walter Bishop demonstrated in his letter to Byrd, were willing to use it in service of conservative political causes. But as broadcasters, they had

¹⁷ Gerald L.K. Smith, *White Men Awaken!* UVA: WRVA Radio. This particular pamphlet began, unoriginally, with a picture of a white woman and a black men getting married, followed by a call to arms: “Eleanor Roosevelt said: ‘We must work for the day when there will be one great American race.’ If the desire of this, the ‘queen’ of the mongrelizers, is fulfilled, America will become a mulatto nation (a nation of Negroid half-breeds and their descendents.) Your grandchildren and great grandchildren will be mulattoes. Believe it or not, that is the ideal of the mob of mongrelizers who are attempting to destroy racial integrity and racial self-respect in the United States of America.”

responsibilities that were in conflict with their personal beliefs and loyalties. Not only did they have to continually prove their commitment to “civic uplift” – which was itself a constantly moving target – but they also had to abide by industry standards for professionalism and balanced news coverage.

As described in chapter 5, local programming was the mainstay of WRVA’s schedule in the television years. Although WRVA continued to run national radio news programs like Edward R. Murrow’s daily reports from CBS through the 1950s, they gradually dedicated more time to local news shows. By the mid- to late-1950s, when “massive resistance” crescendoed, WRVA had several different news programs in the line-up, and a strong News Department to produce them.¹⁸ The question was not whether WRVA would broadcast the segregationists’ response to school desegregation in Richmond and Virginia, but *how*. Some of the most powerful decision-makers at WRVA had expressed unqualified support for the segregationist cause. They could have taken their lead from the editorial board of the *Richmond News Leader*, who turned the newspaper into one of the most prominent advertisements for “massive resistance,” but they did not. At least, not entirely. The substance of radio news was not as easily controlled as printed news; nor did radio industry standards allow the same degree of editorialization that newspapers could exercise. Although WRVA officials had much in common with the editors of Richmond’s white newspapers, including a shared allegiance to Virginia’s conservative Democratic Party, WRVA’s coverage of *Brown* and “massive resistance” differed

¹⁸ WRVA officials highly valued the members of their News Department. Jack Clements, George Passage, and Harry Monroe were groomed to be local stars: sharp men with good hair who were always on the spot when something interesting was happening.

in some subtle but significant ways from the narratives that emerged in the *Richmond News Leader* and *Richmond Times-Dispatch*.

The *Times-Dispatch* and *News Leader* expressed some diversity of opinion on desegregation – particularly in 1954 and 1955 – but their news narrative tended to articulate variations on two common themes by 1956 and beyond: southern race relations should be worked out between southerners with no outside interference, and white southerners were being victimized by a radical, vindictive federal government.¹⁹ In an interview twenty years after *Brown*, former NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall (then a Supreme Court Justice) remembered “we put some trust in the decency of man....I’m afraid we assumed that after a short period of time of one to five years the states would give in [and desegregate the schools]. We did not, however, give enough credence to the two Richmond newspapers, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and the other one...who were determined that they would build up the type of opposition that would prevent the states from voluntarily going along.”²⁰ When Marshall said “the other one,” he referred to the *Richmond News Leader*. The day after the

¹⁹ The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and *Richmond News Leader* were competitors with sometimes dissimilar politics, but they came together in the 1950s over the *Brown v. Board* decision. The editor of the *Times-Dispatch*, Virginius Dabney, was a white southern progressive, by many standards, who occasionally used his newspaper to promote his vision of southern society and politics. For example, see Pippa Holloway’s discussion of his opposition to the proposed “barber bill” of 1930 that would have restricted black ownership of barber shops through the same mechanisms used to suppress black voters. Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia*, 119-120. Although Dabney was a leading voice among white southern liberals in the 1930s and 1940s, he adopted a conservative position on school desegregation in the 1950s. The editor was not afraid to take on the Byrd machine, but he did not openly oppose “massive resistance” in the *Times-Dispatch*’s editorial pages, possibly because of pressure from his staff. But more likely because he could never quite reconcile the end of racial segregation with his version of southern progressivism. For a comprehensive examination of Dabney’s personal politics and career, please see Kneebone, *Southern Liberal Journalists and the Issue of Race*.

²⁰ Interview cited in Joseph J. Thorndike, “Kilpatrick and the Campaign against *Brown*,” in *The Moderates’ Dilemma: Massive Resistance to School Desegregation in Virginia*, 62-63.

ruling came down, editor James Kilpatrick penned an editorial encouraging a reasonable response, but he began corresponding regularly with Senator Harry Byrd, advocating a choreographed resistance to the ruling.²¹ By November 1955, Kilpatrick was fully articulating a strategy of “interposition,” which became both the rallying cry and the legal foundation for “massive resistance” the Byrd himself adopted.²² Under Kilpatrick’s guidance, the *Richmond News Leader* editorial pages became the message board for segregationist opinion and strategy.²³ Kilpatrick and Harry Byrd coordinated their campaign to both unify white southerners against *Brown*, and to ultimately convince a northern white audience that forced desegregation was neither desirable nor practical.²⁴

²¹ Editorial, *Richmond News Leader*, May 18, 1954, 8.

²² “Interposition” resurrected John C. Calhoun’s antebellum doctrine allowing a state to “interpose” its sovereignty between its citizens and the Federal government when the Federal government overstepped its bounds. Joseph Thorndike has argued persuasively that Kilpatrick knew interposition would probably never work as a legal strategy, but he thought the argument for interposition “would help recast the terms of public debate. Concerned that white southerners too often couched their arguments in racial terms that resonated poorly outside their own region, Kilpatrick hoped the lofty idiom of interposition would lift the school debate ‘above the sometimes sordid level of race and segregation.’” Thorndike, “Kilpatrick and the Campaign against *Brown*,” 51-71, 52.

²³ The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* was slightly less reactionary than the *News Leader*, possibly because of editor Virginius Dabney’s belief that racial reform was needed if the South were to modernize. John T. Kneebone has argued that a handful of white, southern liberal journalists such as Dabney advocated interracial cooperation among each race’s elite, and believed that the South could dismantle racial segregation only if a biracial regional elite led the way. Christopher Silver and John V. Moeser, *The Separate City: Black Communities in the Urban South, 1940-1968* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 63-68. Alf Pratte has argued that the American Society of Newspaper Editors – an all-white, all-male institution – considered Dabney and his ilk to have limited powers as “liberal” voices: “To have spoken with a stronger voice at that time probably would have resulted in ...white southern editors having no voice at all.” When Ralph McGill of the Atlanta *Constitution* wrote about the position of the so-called white southern liberal journalist in 1957 at the height of “massive resistance”, he claimed “that moderates had learned to run on the fence – not merely sit on it.” Alf Pratte, “...But There Are Miles to Go”: Racial Diversity and the American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1922-2000.” *The Journal of Negro History* vol. 86, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 160-179, quotation from 164.

²⁴ Nancy MacLean explores the dialogue between Kilpatrick and northern white opponents of desegregation extensively in *Freedom Is Not Enough*. Kilpatrick and *National Review* editor Bill Buckley were particularly cozy. Through Kilpatrick as an intermediary, Buckley solicited the mailing lists of the Citizens’ Councils in 1958, which MacLean estimates at some 65,000 white supremacists. Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 46.

Through the 1950s and into the early 1960s, Richmond's white press developed a simple but cohesive narrative of persecution in which they protested the alleged bias of the national media and attempted to reframe discussion of race relations in judicial rather than racial terms. The editorial pages of both the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and the *Richmond News Leader* launched a campaign against an alleged "Paper Curtain" that was denying southern conservatives fair treatment. "Many of us who are close to this situation, working constantly with racial news, reading the great newspapers and the influential magazines," wrote the *News Leader*, "have learned at first hand of the paper curtain that separates South and North. It has proved a barrier few Southern conservatives ever have been able to pierce."²⁵ In order to pierce the "paper curtain" the *News Leader* called for more southern voices in the mainstream media, assuming those voices would belong to like-minded white southern conservatives. With 50,000 watts of power behind it, WRVA could be one such voice.

Although the desegregation narratives articulated in the *Times-Dispatch* and *News Leader* changed somewhat over time, the rules of debate did not. The newspapers provided little room for civic debate, and did not encourage any position more accommodating than the "gradualism" which crippled the integration of southern schools well into the 1970s. As the "Voice of Virginia," WRVA had an opportunity to advance "massive resistance" and theories of interposition. After all, the station had a close relationship with "massive

²⁵ "The Paper Curtain," *Richmond News Leader*, Aug. 23, 1963, 10. See also Thorndike, "Kilpatrick and the Campaign against *Brown*."

resistance” architect Harry Byrd, and most if not all of the station officials were deeply sympathetic to his cause. In many ways, WRVA also reinforced a message of resistance and fear during the 1950s and early 1960s. But their continued commitment to defining and advancing “uplift” for the community, as well as experiments with editorial programming, forced them to develop a more nuanced conversation of desegregation and race than other mainstream media sources in Virginia. Virginians were listening, and when WRVA opened the door to debate, they walked right in.

*

In the early 1960s, “Monitor South,” a Louisiana outfit proposing “to serve as a white folks’ pressure group in the area of network radio and television” promised to challenge the image of racist southern whites in the mainstream media by advancing reasoned discussion of “racial integrity.” “Hallelujah,” the *Richmond News Leader* cheered. “Pour it on.”²⁶ The white newspapers elaborated many arguments alleging bias against southern whites in the mainstream media. Underneath the reactionary anger was a common plea: pro-segregation, southern, white men needed more professional representatives in

²⁶ “Monitor South” [editorial], *Richmond News Leader*, Jan. 6, 1961, 10. “Monitor South” coordinated “station rejection of provocative network shows,” writing to southern broadcasters “questioning the advisability of showing network documentaries probing the civil rights problems.” J. Fred MacDonald notes that when “Monitor South” was unsuccessful at dissuading regional networks from broadcasting the programs, it requested equal time “to rebut any false political propaganda which serves the Communist racial ideology.” Enough TV stations in Mississippi acquiesced to the requests of “Monitor” South that the FCC felt compelled to clarify broadcasters’ obligations to the “fairness doctrine,” “pointedly noting that the law required broadcasters to present black perspectives when broadcast programs addressed racial integration.” Senator Strom Thurmond from South Carolina then denounced the “fairness doctrine” on the floor of the Senate. J. Fred MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV: African Americans in Television since 1948*, 2nd ed. (Florence, KY: Cengage Learning, 1992), 82. See also Steven D. Classen, *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggles over Mississippi TV, 1955-1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 49-50.

the mainstream media. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* complained that “the press persist in holding the South up to scorn, as though it were inhabited by some sort of strange species of subhuman white people.”²⁷ As a CBS affiliate, and as a 50,000-watt broadcasting station, WRVA was the type of southern voice that the newspapers sought. The “Voice of Virginia” had a large audience and was run by pro-segregation, middle-class white men. Would WRVA be the corrective that anti-civil rights activists hoped for in the national media? Could the station’s white southern voices balance the ledger? WRVA had always walked a fine line in its programming. The station had to maintain a positive relationship with CBS, appeal to listeners on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, and convince Richmond residents that it was promoting civic uplift. This awkward position made station officials cautious in their broadcasting of civil rights, creating a space for challengers to implicitly or explicitly criticize the mechanisms of power that controlled other white Richmond media and protected institutionalized racial discrimination.

The combined effect of three factors pressured WRVA to consider adopting a more nuanced approach to political reporting in the early to mid-1950s than printed white media in the South. For one thing, although the white men who ran WRVA, the *News Leader*, and the *Times-Dispatch* had many common interests and opinions, they were not necessarily friends. The most prominent voices in the white Richmond media frequently disagreed with and disliked one another. Kilpatrick’s rhetoric of “massive resistance” implied consensus among white southerners – indeed, “massive resistance” *depended* upon consensus among

²⁷ “Only ‘Southern Hillbillies,’” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Oct. 3, 1961, 12.

white southerners – but as WRVA records indicate, this consensus was a fiction. Second, as a CBS affiliate, WRVA was closely tied to the national media that the *Richmond News Leader* and *Richmond Times-Dispatch* routinely criticized. Even if WRVA officials wanted to offer a pro-segregation narrative, the network's national news programs could complicate the message because the "Voice of Virginia" would never solely belong to white, pro-segregation southerners. Third, the "Voice of Virginia" reached into the homes of African Americans, who were loyal listeners of the station. Perceiving space for debate, black listeners pressured WRVA to expand dialogue of race relations by including African American contributors and a diversity of opinion. For economic, ethical, or professional reasons, WRVA responded to African American requests to some degree, and the airwaves became one of the least segregated mainstream mediums in the state. In the early 1950s, WRVA was establishing patterns of local news coverage that included minor but crucial acknowledgments of the lack of consensus among Virginians about school desegregation.

In *The Moderates' Dilemma*, historians Matthew D. Lassiter and Andrew B. Lewis call for "a broader examination of Virginia's political culture, of disagreements among white southerners over social and educational priorities, and of stories of individuals and local communities." Lassiter and Lewis urge historians to move beyond the General Assembly in their research of "massive resistance," because "civic leaders and ordinary citizens participated in debates over school desegregation that can be illuminated by weighting the value individual white southerners placed upon public education as it came into conflict

with the legal institution of racial segregation.”²⁸ In 1950s Virginia, WRVA linked ordinary citizens, civic leaders, and the General Assembly in one broad, if not entirely coherent, conversation about the white response to desegregation. And while WRVA officials offered no overt support for the processes of desegregation, neither did they wholly embrace “massive resistance.” Their reluctance to do so illustrates divisions among the white, male proprietors of Richmond’s business and politics that extended beyond interpretations of *Brown*.

Although WRVA employees were not so different from the employees of the white newspapers – they were predominantly all white, middle-class men from the area – competition for audience and revenue made the relationship between WRVA and most of Richmond’s news industry tense. Because WRVA was the most powerful broadcasting station in Central Virginia, it was also the target of ambitious station owners. None gave WRVA more trouble than local stations owned by the *Richmond News Leader* (WRNL) and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (WRTD). By the 1950s, WRVA and the newspaper-owned stations had a long-standing rivalry, with plenty of petty and hostile behavior on all sides.²⁹ The relationship soured to the point that WRVA petitioned congressmen in the 1940s to prevent WRTD and WRNL from gaining a stronger

²⁸ Lassiter and Lewis, “Massive Resistance Revisited: Virginia’s White Moderates and the Byrd Organization,” in *The Moderates’ Dilemma*, 2.

²⁹ When WRNL first went on the air, WRVA officials helped them get started, lending them programming material and presumably teaching them how to run radio as a business. The honeymoon ended quickly. In October 1939, C.T. Lucy was revisiting WRVA’s policy of sharing material from the Mutual Broadcasting System (MBS) with WRNL. He felt that WRNL and the *Richmond News Leader* both did not give WRVA due credit for material that WRVA had paid for. “We cannot afford to spread the impression that Mutual service is available to anybody who wants it. It is a valuable franchise which we have ought and intend to keep as long as possible.” CTL to Barron Howard, Oct. 20, 1939, UVA: WRVA Radio

position on the airwaves.³⁰ WRVA officials believed that the newspapers were establishing a monopoly on the news industry in Central Virginia, which violated principles of free information in a democracy.³¹ They also accused WRNL and WRTD of being motivated only by economic self-interest, whereas WRVA's hallmark was "the unselfish service" that WRVA had "constantly rendered to the City and State," which the FCC periodically praised.³² Even though WRNL and WRTD never offered WRVA serious competition for listenership, tensions between WRVA officials and the two newspaper-owned radio stations were tense well into the 1960s.³³ Even though the officials of all three stations had much in common on the surface – white men in southern radio – they did not necessarily want to work together. WRVA's narratives surrounding school desegregation and other civil rights struggles were more similar than different from the

³⁰ Public Relations Director Walter R. Bishop wrote to U.S. Representative Clifton Woodrum, requesting that he "find ways and means to be helpful to us in the matter without involving yourself to an embarrassing extent." Walter R. Bishop to Hon. Clifton A. Woodrum, Jan. 22, 1940, UVA: WRVA Radio.

³¹ The *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, for example, was owned by a Norfolk newspaper corporation that controlled Norfolk's daily papers as well as its only radio station (WTAR), the only daily newspaper in Petersburg, and two daily newspapers in Richmond. They argued that the addition of a powerful-wattage radio station was too much power in the hands of one corporation. Although WRVA officials' concerns about the encroachment of newspaper-owned radio stations into the airwaves sometimes bordered on the paranoid, the newspapers did conspire to block WRVA's success on occasion. In February 1955, Bishop wrote a desperate letter to Senator A. Willis Robertson. After referring to an address of Robertson's that WRVA had broadcast to the state the previous evening, Bishop informed Robertson of WRVA's obstacles in obtaining a television license from the FCC. While the FCC had given WRVA its initial approval, Bishop wrote, "we hope that the Richmond Newspapers will not appeal the decision and thus delay another station in Richmond months of years. We shall look forward to having you as both our radio and television guest speaker in the future." There is no record of Robertson's reply, but the suggestion of quid-pro-quo is unmistakable. WRB to A. Willis Robertson, Feb. 15 1955, UVA: WRVA Radio.

³² Walter R. Bishop to Hon. Clifton A. Woodrum, Jan. 22, 1940, UVA: WRVA Radio.

³³ In 1950, after two decades of competition, WRVA regularly trounced WRNL in program-to-program comparisons. According to a WRVA Continuous Survey from March 13-24, 1950, WRVA had an average of between three and four times as many listeners as WRNL. As late as 1963 in a survey commissioned by Richmond Newspapers, Inc, WRVA still claimed one out of every three listeners in the Richmond area at a given moment. WRNL was third in the rankings with 22 percent of all listeners. "WRVA Surveys, March 1950," LVA: WRVA Radio. See also Survey – Adult Radio Audience, Feb.-March 1963, LVA: WRVA Radio.

newspaper narratives, many of which found their way onto WRNL and WRTD, but even subtle distinctions opened up a public forum that might otherwise have been closed. Had James Kilpatrick controlled WRVA like he controlled his own newspaper as well as the *Times-Dispatch*, the radio station would never have been able to experiment with their news programming like it did in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Even if WRVA officials had set aside their professional enmity for the *News Leader*, they would not have been able to present the united front against desegregation in their news programs that Kilpatrick advocated. WRVA had broadcast its first network program from the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in November 1927, and had been an affiliate of either NBC or CBS ever since.³⁴ The station produced its own local news programs, but also ran the programs of national commentators like Edward R. Murrow of CBS. Unsurprisingly, CBS's news narrative often differed from narratives articulated in the white Richmond press, especially regarding desegregation.

A lack of archived material about other radio stations in the Richmond area makes it difficult to determine whether other area broadcasters were also airing national news programming in large doses. Communications scholar Steven Classen has found, however, that television broadcasters of the Deep South (all of whom were white in the 1950s and 1960s) frequently found ways of

³⁴ From June 1937 until 1959, WRVA was an affiliate of the Columbia Broadcasting Service (CBS). On Jan. 28 of that year, WRVA switched its affiliation to the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), CBS's main competitor. From late January until mid-June 1959, WRVA switched back and forth between each networks' programming while they made the transition, which meant that listeners were treated to each networks' news programs, along with WRVA's local programming. The decision to move from NBC to CBS in 1959 was based on financial decisions, not political ones.

minimizing national news programming whenever possible if it addressed desegregation or other civil rights activism. In his book *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggles over Mississippi TV, 1955-1969*, Classen argues that structurally and ideologically, Jackson's local media were overtly "aligned at their conception with white supremacist and segregationist interests," and the two most powerful TV stations in Jackson "complemented an already intimidating white power bloc including prominent business leaders, bankers, politicians, clergy, and police departments determined to thwart integration of 'black freedom' advances in the fifties."³⁵ Regardless of their affiliation with national networks and their contractual obligations with them, Jackson television stations WLBT and WJTV flatly refused to air national news when they did not like it.³⁶ Classen argues that the station managers' "decisions were typical of many other station managers throughout the South."³⁷ Virginia is not Mississippi, and radio is not the same as television, but it is likely that many of Classen's arguments would hold true of radio network affiliates elsewhere in the South.³⁸ Even if WRVA was not the sole vehicle in Central Virginia through which radio listeners had regular access to comprehensive national news coverage of desegregation, it is unlikely that all the other stations offered the same access.

³⁵ Classen, *Watching Jim Crow*, 1-2

³⁶ Classen cites a 1962 memo in which the WLBT general manager reminded his staff explicitly that "programs with references to racial integration or segregation were *not* to be aired." Classen, *Watching Jim Crow*, 49.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Historian Clive Webb remarks in his book *Massive Resistance*, "Southern society was closed, but Mississippi verged on totalitarianism." Local television in Jackson and local radio in Richmond were similar in that they were both controlled by conservative, white men, and they were both affiliates of national networks. But Mississippi had a far more repressive and violent atmosphere than Virginia in the 1950s and 1960s, so I do not want to overstate the parallel. See Michael J. Klarman, "Why Massive Resistance?" in *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction*, edited by Clive Webb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27.

WRVA's inclusion of the national news reports meant that flashpoints in the struggle to desegregate were covered from multiple perspectives, diluting the influence of any one particular point of view. When Governor Orval Faubus used the Arkansas National Guard to prevent nine African American students from entering Central High School in direct defiance of a Federal Court order on Sept. 3, 1957, CBS ran a news segment entitled "Parts of the World on Segregation" in their regular news programs. Newsman Larry LaSueur carried listeners to Central High School in Little Rock, the Forsyth County Courthouse in North Carolina, and the White House. LaSueur and the contributing, on-location reporters brought the sounds of anger and protest over both segregation and desegregation into the listeners' homes. CBS reporter Bob Shackney summarized the stand-off in Little Rock for LaSueur, and finished his report with the following:

The governor's stand, by the way, is disputed strongly by the school board and by a number of leading white clergymen. They say his figures are wrong. They say his warnings of possible violence in the event of integration are unfounded. The last word may be decided in federal court tonight, but what a federal court can do against the wishes of a southern governor with a national guard at his disposal is problematical.³⁹

Shackney's report struck an accusatory tone that no doubt drove proponents of "massive resistance" wild. By implying that Faubus was a loose cannon with a state militia at his disposal, the CBS news report undercut the "law and order" that segregationists claimed Jim Crow protected.

Before LaSueur turned to Washington for President Eisenhower's reaction, the CBS news team brought the audience to the steps of the Forsyth

³⁹ CD-150: "Parts of the World on Segregation," Sept. 3, 1957, LVA: WRVA Radio.

County Courthouse in North Carolina where convicted segregationist John Kasper, out on bail, delivered his pro-segregation doctrine to a crowd of several dozen people.⁴⁰ The crowd, however, was not as sympathetic as Kasper had expected, and “he was greeted by heavy heckling, jeers, and jibes from a completely unsegregated crowd of about 200, composed of about as many Negroes as whites.”⁴¹ Reporter George Thomas made sure the microphones caught not only Kasper’s rambling address, but also the crowd’s response. “Now, alright. I’ll tell you this,” Kasper began. “I’ll tell you this right at the outset. If the colored folks, if the colored folks were smart. If they wanted to stop with what they’ve got right now, they’d be well off. They leave well enough alone. They’ve got better schools, better schools than the white people.” Despite unsympathetic murmuring from the crowd, Kasper plowed on:

What about, what about the venereal disease? Now, before the schools were mixed in Washington, D.C., there were not two dozen cases of VD in one year [laughter]. After the first year of mixed schools in Washington, D.C., there were 1900 cases of VD, including a 6-year-old Nigra boy with syphilis. And that’s the kind of folks that the white people are supposed to go...it is *not* a lie. That is sworn testimony. I can prove it to you. Those are the kind of folks, those are the kind of folks that they want to put in school with the white people.⁴²

⁴⁰ John Kasper first gained notoriety in August 1956 when he launched a vicious attack against the segregation of high schools in Clinton, Tennessee. Although the Clinton schools desegregated anyway, Kasper’s outspoken segregationist activism turned a relatively quiet transition into emotional and violent pitched battle. Historian Clive Webb argues that Kasper had a “complicated” effect on “massive resistance,” “both advancing and undermining its cause.” Clive Webb, *Rabble Rousers: The American Far Right in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 40. See especially chapter 2: A Collapse of Law and Order; John Kasper and Segregationist Resistance in Clinton.” See also Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 351, 415.

⁴¹ CD-150: “Parts of the World on Segregation,” Sept. 3, 1957, LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁴² Ibid.

Kasper had fallen back on a classic white argument against integration: racial mixing in public spaces would translate into racial mixing in the bedroom, thereby “polluting” or weakening the white race. But the mixed-race crowd in front of the Forsyth County Courthouse openly jeered Kasper and his argument. Radio listeners could hear shouts of “Liar!” and booing.

Before long, Kasper abandoned his prepared speech for a back-and-forth with the hecklers, who began advancing arguments about race relations of their own. “We don’t need any of this radicalism,” one man called out. “You come here calling us disease-ridden people and rapists like that and we resent it. Any man of any blood black or white would resent it. If you’ve got something constructive to say to us we’d be glad to hear it and we’d have the answers for it.” Kasper’s voice became less steady and his sentences more fragmented as members of the crowd shouted “Never!,” “Stop!,” and “Look at that mouth he’s got!” Kasper tried to make a final stand, “You white folks can see why the, why white people don’t like to associate with nigras.” One man’s voice rose above the crowd, silencing it temporarily:

Oh yes they do! Oh yessir yes they do! We build factories here! We build hospitals together. We are spreading out this city together. The white people in this town will tell you, that the Negro is the best friend he’s got. And you white folks know it. Are you gonna let a man like this come in this town, and sow dissension and discord in this peaceful city and bring about division between our races? We have made progress here, we gonna keep it this way if it costs us blood!⁴³

In the previous segment, Orval Faubus had not gotten a soundbite, but CBS brought the words of African Americans straight into the homes of its listeners.

The scene in front of the courthouse was captured mostly from the crowd’s

⁴³ Ibid.

perspective. For a few brief minutes, the radio listener stood alongside the black and white members of the community as they laughed and jeered the segregationist out of town. The implied parallel to Faubus and the stand-off in Little Rock was unmistakable.

Although not produced in WRVA studios, news programs like this one went out on the "Voice of Virginia" regularly. If any of the broadcasters disagreed with or took offense to the newscasts, there is no evidence that WRVA officials ever tried to censor or manipulate network programming to favor one political cause over another.⁴⁴ The "Voice of Virginia" was comprised of many contributors, and it became clear from the early days of "massive resistance" that the station would have to make room for multiple perspectives.

A week before WRVA switched to NBC in January 1959, WRVA ran Edward R. Murrow's famous documentary on the closing of the Norfolk Public School system, entitled "The Lost Class of '59." Murrow was the most recognizable personality in news in the 1940s and 1950s. After having famously reported on the war in Europe, Murrow had come back to the United States to resume his career in domestic news. In March 1954, Murrow took on Senator Joseph McCarthy and the Red Scare in an episode of *See It Now*. Although McCarthy attempted to smear Murrow with charges of communism and anti-Americanism, the charges did not stick. Rather than alienate his audience,

⁴⁴ The station dropped CBS for NBC at the height of "massive resistance" in 1959, but there is no evidence that the switch was made for political reasons. To the contrary, Bishop claimed one reason for the switch was that "CBS is reducing the number of programs available to its affiliate stations." Like CBS, NBC took a more progressive view of race relations than most of the southern white media, and WRVA continued to broadcast network programs such as "Image Minorities" that were also at odds with segregationist principles. WRB to A.B. Williams, March 10, 1959, UVA: WRVA Radio.

Murrow won their trust.⁴⁵ By 1955, Edward R. Murrow's radio broadcast was far and away WRVA's most listened-to news program. In fact, Edward R. Murrow's program was the second-most listened-to network show WRVA offered, beaten only by *Godfrey Talent Scouts*. Murrow had almost twice as many listeners as WRVA's own George Passage, who gave his news reports on the weekend.⁴⁶ Murrow was a strong presence on the "Voice of Virginia"; people listened to him.

In "The Lost Class of '59," originally broadcast Jan. 21, 1959, Murrow interviewed Governor Lindsay Almond on the future of Virginia's public schools. The Supreme Court of Virginia and the Federal District Court in Richmond were both hearing evidence on the constitutionality of school closings, and most signs indicated the courts would rule against the segregationists. Murrow asked Gov. Lindsay Almond sharp questions about Almond's continued efforts to keep public schools closed rather than integrated, as well as his commitment to privatized education for whites if all else failed. Almond was an able debater, with his slow, statesmanlike drawl and lawyer's vocabulary. He had been a political darling for WRVA during his time as the Commonwealth's attorney general and governor, but Murrow's questions forced Almond into uncomfortable territory. After Almond declared "the people...have repeatedly spoken, in no uncertain terms, that we cannot maintain public education on a racially mixed basis," Murrow followed with "Well, sir, do you think it's economically possible for Virginia to educate her

⁴⁵ For a solid treatment of Murrow's life and career, see A. M. Sperber, *Edward R. Murrow: His Life and Times*, 5th ed. (New York: Freudlich Books, 1998) and Joseph E. Persico, *Edward R. Murrow: An American Original* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988).

⁴⁶ "Twenty-nine of the thirty top radio programs are all on WRVA-Radio," 1955, LVA: WRVA Radio.

children on a private basis?”⁴⁷ Murrow forced Almond to admit on the air, albeit circuitously, that policies of “massive resistance” not only discriminated on the basis of race, but also by class. A continued commitment to school closings and privatization meant that a generation of black *and* white students would not receive a high school education. Many historians have argued that, in the end, this conundrum was precisely what fractured the “massive resistance” coalition in Virginia; once the white public understood the costs of preventing integration *for white Virginians*, moderate voices prevailed.⁴⁸

Murrow closed his program with the words of Joseph Leslie, the white editor of Norfolk’s afternoon *Ledger-Dispatch*, “It is evident that the “massive resistance” program, as we have known it, has reached a dead end, and that closed schools will not be the final answer to this question.”⁴⁹ The program, which aired shortly before the Federal District Court ruled that any law “requiring a continuance of racial discrimination [was] patently unconstitutional,” and the Virginia Supreme Court ruled that “it was unlawful automatically to close a school

⁴⁷ “Excerpt from “The Lost Class of ’59,” ed. Edward R. Murrow and Fred W. Friendly, aired Jan. 21, 1959, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Elizabeth Jacoway and David R. Colburn, *Southern Businessmen and Desegregation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982). Most of the essays in *The Moderates’ Dilemma* focus on the specter of school closure as a rallying point for white moderates disgusted with the consequences of “massive resistance.” Lassiter and Lewis, eds., *The Moderate Dilemma*. See especially J. Douglas Smith, “When Reason Collides with Prejudice”: Armistead Lloyd Boothe and the Politics of Moderation,” 22-50; Andrew B. Lewis, “Emergency Mothers: Basement Schools and the Preservation of Public Education in Charlottesville,” 72-103; James H. Hershman, Jr., “Massive Resistance Meets Its Match: The Emergence of a Pro-Public School Majority,” 104-133.

⁴⁹ “Excerpt from “The Lost Class of ’59,” ed. Edward R. Murrow and Fred W. Friendly, aired Jan. 21, 1959, UVA: WRVA Radio.

that integrates by cutting off its state funds,” made room for the moderate voices that would ultimately prevail in the question of desegregation in Virginia.⁵⁰

The documentary was of sufficient interest to WRVA radio officials that they obtained a transcript of it for their records – a rare gesture. Although any letters responding to the program have been lost, traces of evidence indicate that listeners all over the country followed Murrow’s broadcast, and wrote to WRVA requesting transcripts of the program for themselves. Mrs. Roger Rice of Athens, Ohio, for example, wrote to the station in search of a transcript from Murrow’s follow-up broadcast on Feb. 18 entitled “The School System of Jefferson County, CO.” Although WRVA was no longer an affiliate with CBS by the time of the Jefferson County broadcast, Walter Bishop forwarded Rice’s request to CBS headquarters, adding that “Mrs. Rice’s husband is a prominent minister of that city,” amplifying the importance of complying with her request.⁵¹ More than three years after its initial broadcast, “The Lost Class of ‘59” was still attracting enough interest that Harry Byrd wrote to WRVA requesting a copy, which Bishop hastened to obtain.⁵² The tone of Murrow’s documentary was at odds with the

⁵⁰ Murrow was surprised by some of the pushback he received for the “Lost Class,” which came from some unexpected quarters. Biographer Ann Sperber describes an encounter immediately after the broadcast that a friend later reported to Murrow. While in a white barbershop, a white salesman approached Murrow’s friend and said, “Boy, did Murrow fuck us up!” The “Lost Class” had mentioned that the salesman’s company was segregated, and “now blacks were picketing all over Virginia.” The salesman was from Newark, but worried that the protest would spread to New Jersey as well, “we do a lot of business with the niggers there...if that picketing ever hits us here we stand to lose plenty! Boy, Murrow hasn’t heard the last of this!” This brief exchange indicates not only the interregional politics of broadcasting news about school desegregation, but also suggests that African Americans in Virginia absorbed the broadcasts and used it as a catalyst for action. Sperber, *Murrow: His Life and Times*, 548.

⁵¹ WRB to Sig Michelson, New York, New York, May 14, 1959, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁵² Though Byrd’s reasons for making the request are not immediately apparent, his reliance on WRVA to provide him with the transcript illustrates the degree to which WRVA served as an intermediary between national media and regional media in Virginia, and between politicians and

tone of the *News Leader*, and even with most of the speeches on the floor of the General Assembly at the time. Murrow's criticism of the school closings on legal, moral, and practical grounds helped crack the unified front proponents of "massive resistance" hoped the local white media would present.

The documentary was only one news product about desegregation from a national network that WRVA aired. But "The Lost Class of '59" is representative of the critical tone many national network news analysts adopted when discussing "massive resistance". By some standards, the national newsmen handled the stories with kidgloves, especially in the late 1950s; they were courteous to southern statesmen, by and large, and rarely engaged in direct attacks. But even the subtle criticism of reports like Murrow's was a significant difference from the way WRVA treated Almond. Just two months before Murrow's report aired, for example, WRVA broadcast the entirety of the governor's speech to the Virginia Educational Association Convention, in which Almond delivered an emotional address culminating in the following:

I made it clear in my campaign for the governorship that I would do everything within my power to preserve the cause of public education. I re-affirm that pledge. [Applause] I knew then, as has become so evident now, the NAACP [said very slowly], and the federal courts, would exercise with arrogance every power and act to a man [?] to *force* the mixing of the races in public schools. Mark my words, they have no regard for the cause of public education, nor for the rights of the masses of the people. [Applause] They are counting on the lethargy, the softness, and indifference of the people. They proclaim that the people are devoid of the courage of conviction and the spirit of sacrifice for principle. If, by your action, you plead guilty to that indictment, you will never rid yourselves of the shackles of its penalties. You will transmit those shackles to our

their constituents. WRB to Gordon F. Hayes, Affiliate Relations, CBS, NY, March 13, 1962, UVA: WRVA Radio.

children, and you will aid in destroying any rational concept of an efficient state-wide system of public education. [Applause]⁵³

In this and other instances, the WRVA news team did not introduce, analyze, or contextualize the governor's speech. Almond declared *Brown v. Board* to be unconstitutional; he accused white gradualists of being soft and lethargic. He called for sacrifice and aggressive action in support of Jim Crow schools. And like the white newspapers, he condemned the NAACP in strong terms. The news team neither supported nor criticized the governor's speech. In the late 1950s, they struggled to find a comfortable formula for reporting on civil rights initiatives, and they often preferred to run political speeches without commentary rather than say the "wrong" thing and make enemies. J. Fred MacDonald refers to this approach as one of "studied neutrality," but such a term is slightly misleading.⁵⁴ WRVA chose often not to comment on the political speeches it aired, but the very airing of those speeches had political consequences. The station did not observe a policy of neutrality when it came to access to the microphone, privileging those who already had power over those who did not. But the inclusion of national network news, and the addition of WRVA's own hybrid news/ entertainment programming in the mid- to late 1950s, meant that the "Voice of Virginia" had more nuanced news coverage than most of the mainstream white media in Virginia.

⁵³ CD-300: "Almond, J. Lindsay, Jr., Address at Virginia Educational Association Convention," Oct. 30, 1958, LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁵⁴ MacDonald refers specifically to a 1958 policy statement issued by television station WAVY-10, Virginia Beach, Virginia. The statement announced that the WAVY-TV staff would not "editorialize, give an opinion, or predict any future development relative to the integration issue." MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV*, 70-71.

News programming on WRVA during the 1950s and 1960s was a double helix of information and analysis from New York and Richmond. Unlike the white newspapers, who could privilege their stories and editorials over those of the Associated Press, the terms of WRVA's contract and commercial realities prevented WRVA from becoming myopic and single-minded in its news narratives. Listeners heard stories from all over the country and from many different perspectives (though admittedly almost exclusively from white men), and many of the listeners sensed an opportunity. As a mainstream source of news for thousands of Virginians, WRVA had opened up a conversation about race relations, however imperfect. Because of the nature of the medium, listeners could engage directly – and frequently without a script – to the narrative they were hearing. And because radio was neither as visible nor tightly controlled as television, there was more room for divergent opinions.

In 1951 WRVA commissioned a survey of "Negro Listening Habits in Richmond, Virginia," presumably because the businessmen wanted to sell African American listenership to advertisers targeting the black community. The survey indicated that WRVA easily surpassed any other radio stations in town, commanding as much as 46 percent of black listeners at a given time. Station WANT, which featured "race programming," had an average of one black listener for every six or seven tuned to WRVA. Moreover, in the evening hours when WANT and other stations were off the air, WRVA had more than twice as many black listeners as the runner-up WRNL.⁵⁵ The survey indicated that more black Richmonders listened to WRVA than any other station in Central Virginia, and

⁵⁵ "Negro Listening Habits in Richmond, VA, 1951," UVA: WRVA Radio.

while the raw numbers do not explain why they chose WRVA, a close examination of WRVA's programming, and the black listeners' responses to it, indicate that black listeners extracted meanings from WRVA's programming that sometimes station officials did not foresee, and used the station as a vehicle for their own purposes in the civil rights era.

WRVA officials had incorporated African Americans in their programming since the station's inception in 1925. In the early years, WRVA hired dozens of black musicians, celebrating acts like the Edgeworth Negro Chorus and later the Silver Star Quartet as some of their best material.⁵⁶ Indeed, the sound of black voices – either authentic or mimicked through blackface – was an important component of WRVA's self-identification as a "southern" radio station in its first few decades, as explored in chapter one. While performance troupes were not integrated, the station nonetheless made a conscious effort to have white *and* black voices on the air, and they sold the biracial line-up as something quintessentially southern.

In the 1950s, WRVA's entertainment programming, as well as its relationship with the black community, was changing. As discussed in chapter 5, WRVA made a conscious decision to privilege sounds of whiteness in entertainment, and especially the sounds of the highly racialized "hillbilly," over the diversity of sounds it had sold in the 1920s and 1930s. But even as WRVA "whitewashed" its entertainment programming, Public Relations Director Walter

⁵⁶ The Silver Star Quartet was a black men's singing group that became a weekly WRVA feature in 1939. The leader's sister said the quartet sang "church" music because "our mother wouldn't have allowed anything else." "Silver Star Quartet Founder Dies," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Aug. 3, 1997, B1.

R. Bishop made a conscientious effort to establish a respectful, working relationship with the black religious community, and to broadcast black church services.⁵⁷ By building a professional relationship with arguably the strongest and most visible black institutions in the city, Bishop ensured that dozens of black leaders would have regular access to powerful microphones. The response to the broadcasts from black and white listeners illustrates the complexity of mid-century race relations, and the ways in which African Americans in particular used religion on the air as a vehicle for broader political purposes.

By 1953, WRVA was broadcasting a church service from a black church every Sunday morning at 10, and the broadcasts proved popular with listeners of all races. Listeners heard sermons and music from Third Street Bethel A.M.E., First African Baptist, St. Philip's Episcopal, Second Baptist, Leigh Street Methodist, and Ebenezer Baptist, among others.⁵⁸ When responding to a letter from the Dean of the Chapel at Richmond's black university, Virginia Union, Bishop explained:

For some time we had been contemplating this series from representative Negro churches, and we have been gratified with the listener response to these inspiring broadcasts. We are glad to be instrumental in giving desired recognition to these churches over a larger area. In addition to enlarging the ministry of these churches as their services inspire and bless many thousands, we believe that they should result in greatly improved race relations.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ It is possible that black church leaders approached Bishop with the idea. Correspondence with Rev. P.B. Walker of Third Street Bethel indicates that a handful of black ministers may have presented the idea and suggested methods of implementation. Additionally, Joseph Matthews, choir director of Fifth Street Baptist Church, had worked with Bishop in WRVA's earliest days as the leader of the Cotton Pickers' musical group, and was part of the first series of black churches services the station broadcast in 1953. Matthews may have served as an ambassador between the church(es) and the station. P.B. Walker to WRB, July 14, 1954; WRB to P.B. Walker, July 19, 1954; Ethel Henry to WRB, n.d.; WRB to Ethel Henry, Dec. 1, 1953, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁵⁸ "Negro Church Services 1954," UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁵⁹ WRB to E. Theodore Jones, Oct. 28, 1953, UVA: WRVA Radio.

WRVA officials had long considered faith-based programming as a critical component of “civic uplift,” and were hoping the church services would stabilize relations between white and black Richmonders. Bishop probably genuinely respected the black ministers he put on the air, but he did not put them on the air because he wanted white Richmonders to integrate their flocks. For Bishop and other WRVA officials, “greatly improved race relations” had nothing to do with integration or even Christian fellowship, but rather with the black community’s commitment to helping itself, and staying on its own side of the Jim Crow lines.

Neither Walter Bishop nor Calvin Lucy believed in integration of public or private spaces, and they did not see the inclusion of African American church services as a desegregation of their religious programming. With the *Negro Church Services* broadcasts, WRVA officials believed they were helping blacks help themselves. Almost a decade after the *Negro Church Services* first went on the air, Bishop received a letter from a southern, inter-church organization committed to ending Jim Crow. “One might strive to justify a break in fellowship because of a doctrinal difference,” the writer claimed, “but to do so because of a pigmentary difference is abhorrent to the Christian conscience.” Lucy and Bishop traded the letter back and forth, criticizing the author’s premise that Christian doctrine did not permit segregated worship on moral grounds. “The Church folk are certainly getting race conscious,” Bishop wrote to Lucy. “I still think we can help the colored more through their own churches.” To which Lucy replied “You bet!! And for the life of me I can’t understand why these well meaning gents can’t see what they’re getting us into. The next step will be

intermingling of congregations, equal use of white hotels, restaurants, theatres. Then socially in our homes and inter-marriage [Lucy's emphasis]. With the worst conflict of all, instead of the 'Christian brotherhood' they talk about."⁶⁰ When officials expressed a desire to "improve race relations," they generally meant they wanted to perfect the status quo. The *Negro Church Services* seemed a safe way to do that.

The gesture of outreach was both a reaffirmation of WRVA's avowed civic mission, and an innovative development in the station's relationship with the black community, no matter the officials' private commitment to segregation. WRVA had always promoted Christian values and worship as station officials believed it to be in the best interest of the community, but now the station was making an explicit commitment to improving race relations as well.⁶¹ By handing over the microphones to the African American ministers, the station was bringing the voices of black leadership directly into people's homes, unfiltered by anyone other than the minister. The decision to broadcast black services in their entirety was a significant departure from the station's previous broadcasts of Gospel choirs and spiritual singers. For one thing, the services gave the black ministers – who were the "M.C.s" of the show, in a sense – an opportunity to develop a narrative of faith, respect, or protest. The ministers and congregations also commanded a moral and spiritual authority that paid entertainers never could.

⁶⁰ Southeastern Inter-Council Office of Atlanta, General Assembly to WRB, Jan. 23, [1962], UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁶¹ For an explanation of WRVA's long-term commitment to the "spiritual side of radio," see the description of *The Sunshine Hour* in chap. 1, "Down Where the South Begins: Sounds of Confusion."

And the response of Virginians of all races turned out to be overwhelmingly positive.

Letters of white listeners tended to either commend the quality of the sermons and music, or, less frequently, to compliment the station for its contribution to improved race relations. "It is a very generous and broadminded gesture which should do much for better race relations," wrote Gladys Musgrave of Newsoms, Virginia. "I feel that they have something worthwhile to offer as well as the white churches and it should be recognized."⁶² The letters from white listeners rhetorically divided "us" (the white listener and Bishop) from "them" (the African American ministers or congregation), a mentality generated and reaffirmed by the practices of racial segregation. But despite statements of difference, white listeners also pointed to a *lack* of difference – perhaps even a sameness – between white and black worshippers when it came to religion.

Black listeners understood the significance of the broadcasts in more overtly political terms, though their words to Bishop were carefully chosen.⁶³ Letters from black ministers, congregants, and listeners dwelled less on the bridging of difference than on the importance of keeping black voices on the

⁶² Gladys Musgrave of Newsoms, Virginia, to WRB, Nov. 30, 1953, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁶³ In his groundbreaking examination of black radio stations during the Civil Rights era, Brian Ward argued that "radio warrants a prominent place among the many social and cultural institutions that shaped the African-American freedom struggle and fashioned important changes in racial attitudes and arrangements in the South." Ward found that black radio stations could be key players in local civil rights initiatives by spreading word about demonstrations, sometimes in code, by bringing unfiltered news to black southerners, and by functioning as sounding boards (ha) for people excited by both fear and optimism. He also found that black radio owners sometimes responded to commercial and political forces by withholding support from civil rights initiatives. In short, sometimes black radio stations mattered, and sometimes they did not. WRVA also had no consistent message on desegregation, "massive resistance", the NAACP, or civil rights initiatives in general, but WRVA was consistently prominent among the Virginia media. Brian Ward, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004): 328.

airwaves. E. Theodore Jones, the Dean of the Chapel at Virginia Union University, complimented Bishop on the *Negro Church Services* series: "Whatever your ultimate goal, you have initiated a project of high purpose and vision. Congratulations!" Jones singled out the brief church history, provided by the church, that a WRVA announcer read before each service for particular praise. "Your introductory statement is very informative in regards to the historical significance of many of Richmond's Christian Congregations heretofore unknown to the City at large."⁶⁴ In a later letter, Jones commended the station "as a pioneer in an effort to create a richer and more wholesome religio-cultural climate among the peoples of our community."⁶⁵ Jones had identified specific opportunities for the advancement of African American concerns through WRVA's broadcasts, and his steady letter-writing campaign (his relationship with WRVA extended far beyond fan mail) emphasized the continued "visibility" of black churches and leadership on the airwaves. Yes, the programs would create common, Christian ground for both black and white listeners, but through these broadcasts black religious leaders could also claim a legitimacy and authority that other white media – and, more generally, Jim Crow – denied them.

Consider the "introductory statements" to which Jones referred. Each church submitted its history to Bishop, who incorporated it into the script, apparently without any substantial revision. So when First African Baptist Church, located only a few blocks from the Capitol, aired its services on May 9, 1954, the WRVA announcer explained that First African Baptist had had a mixed

⁶⁴ E. Theodore Jones, VUU, to WRB, Oct. 28, 1953, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁶⁵ E. Theodore Jones, VUU, to WRB, March 15, 1954, UVA: WRVA Radio.

race congregation from 1780 until 1840 when white members formed a separate church, and the church continued to have “a very fine relationship” with the white congregation.⁶⁶ While the introduction may have been a statement of fact, it was also a subversion of the Jim Crow myth. Black and white Richmonders had once voluntarily and lawfully worshipped together; such an assertion undermined segregationists’ claims that racial separation was “natural” or part of some inherited tradition. The “script” that First African Baptist had given WRVA included a message intended to problematize assumptions about the permanence or inevitability of racial segregation.

The introductory statements also made it clear that black ministers were more than spiritual leaders. Virtually every introduction referenced the ministers’ social, cultural, or political initiatives, masked under the general term “civic.”⁶⁷ The “religio-cultural climate” that Jones mentioned in his letter to Bishop was an oblique reference to the complicated role of religion in the social and political hierarchies of mid-century Virginia. Jones understood that religious or cultural authority translated into political authority in the Commonwealth, and he wanted to make sure that WRVA continued to provide black churches the opportunity to claim a position in the system.

A pattern emerges in the fan letters, in which multiple listeners make explicit reference to *radio*. Reverend P.B. Walker of Third Street Bethel wrote Bishop to tell him how well-received the broadcasts had been, having received “many telephone calls, as well as verbal expressions, from persons who were

⁶⁶ Church history, “First African Baptist Church, 14th and Broad Streets,” UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁶⁷ See, for example, any number of scripts that can be found in UVA: WRVA Radio, box 65, folder 622: Negro Church Services 1954.

spiritually benefitted by these messages, which I think, through this medium, have brought us together in our thinking and devotion in an acquaintance of lasting impression.”⁶⁸ John H. Lewis, a black congregant, wrote, “I know that WRVA is offering a great privilege to our people in that our worship services may be heard through the medium of Radio.”⁶⁹ Black Richmonders knew very well that WRVA’s broadcast of the *Negro Church Services* created an unusual opportunity for the black community. WRVA was not a black-owned and -operated media outlet like the *Afro-American Planet*. But nor was it the *Richmond News Leader* or WRNL. WRVA did not employ African Americans to work on the microphones, but by opening up those microphones to black Richmonders, the station incorporated black messages into the mainstream media of Virginia – messages that were unfiltered by white broadcasters. Whether consciously or unwittingly, Walter R. Bishop and the station had adapted their policy of “civic uplift” in a manner that made it possible for African Americans to chip away at the mechanisms of power that ignored black leadership, or ridiculed it. From the mid-1950s onwards, black Richmonders found ways of incorporating themselves into the “Voice of Virginia” that extended well beyond Sunday morning church services.

Black Richmonders did not always wait to be invited to the microphone; sometimes they claimed a legal right to it. Radio altered the rules of debate within local media in substantive and critical ways. Print journalists, for example, crafted their stories ahead of time and their editors had final approval over

⁶⁸ Rev. P.B. Walker to WRB, July 14, 1954, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁶⁹ John H. Lewis to WRB, n.d. [1954], UVA: WRVA Radio.

whether the pieces went to print. If a reader disagreed with a stated or implied position, the most he or she could do was write a letter to the editor. And the editorial boards of both the *Richmond News Leader* and the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* were notoriously of one mind on the matter of race relations, especially after 1957. Broadcast media like radio, on the other hand, provided for more unscripted conversations with more contributors. While WRVA officials had the power to grant or deny access to their microphones, they could not necessarily control those persons once on the air. Nor did officials indicate a strong desire to control content.⁷⁰ WRVA, along with most radio stations, encouraged relatively unchoreographed exchange of ideas.⁷¹ Lacking rigid structure and supervision, at least when compared to the *Richmond News Leader* and *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, dialogues about race and race relations on the air encompassed a broader selection of perspectives.

In 1953, as *Brown v. Board* moved to conclusion, WRVA was approached by a group who wanted to broadcast their opposition to desegregation. WRVA granted the anti-desegregation group several time slots over the course of a week, and gave the NAACP eleven ten-minute slots over a period of five days in late December for their “subject speakers” to rebut the anti-desegregationists.⁷² The highlight of the NAACP programs was a roundtable discussion held between

⁷⁰ Station manager John Tansey chewed out Thomas V. Webb, Promotion Director of Central Richmond Retail Association, when Webb tried to dictate the content of a program his company was sponsoring. Tansey informed Webb in no uncertain terms that he could not tell WRVA what to broadcast just because he was buying ad time. Sponsorship did not equal control. John Tansey to Thomas Webb, Dec. 10, 1959, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁷¹ The fluidity and immediacy of radio news gave it an edge over print media, and WRVA attracted large enough audiences for its news programming to charge advertisers high rates.

⁷² The records only refer generally to the anti-desegregation group, so I know neither the group's name nor the names of the people who represented it on the air.

Oliver Hill, a prominent African American attorney from Richmond, Mrs. Dilworth Lupton, the white wife of the head of the Richmond Unitarian Church, and H.H. Southall, a district superintendent and member of the Board of Directors for the Southern Aid Life Insurance Company. Southall, a white man “identified with the civic, cultural and industrial advance of our city,” was the event’s moderator.⁷³ The fifteen-minute conversation revolved around two themes: universal brotherhood (legally interpreted as “equal rights under the law” by Hill), and a commonsense, interracial approach to desegregation.

Lupton called on white parents and PTAs to voluntarily desegregate in order to set a good example for their children:

The more I work on inter-racial matters the more I am convinced of the great unknown, untapped quantity of good will that exists among white people across the country...Integrated public schools should help us bring up a generation of people almost free of these fears and superstitions, a generation that may be able to practice simple goodness and justice.⁷⁴

Where, but on the radio, could you have heard a black man and a white woman discussing desegregation calmly and in positive terms? And where, for that matter, could you have found a round table discussion led by the NAACP in the mainstream local media? Both the *Times-Dispatch* and the *News Leader*, perhaps taking their cues from General Assembly delegates, targeted the NAACP for special venom. Reporters and politicians rarely interviewed or referenced local African Americans who wanted to send their children to desegregated schools. Instead, they let the NAACP’s official statements represent the totality of African American opinion, even as they made frequent

⁷³ Spot announcement for an “NAACP Week” program, sponsored by NAACP, Feb. 21, 1953, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

claims that the NAACP was unrepresentative of black Richmonders.⁷⁵ White journalists made a habit of connecting the NAACP to “outside agitators” and communists, so they could dismiss its arguments, and by extension the African American perspective, as a threat to law and order. By limiting the African American voice to the much-maligned official statements and speeches of the NAACP, the white newspapers severely curtailed the depth of debate on desegregation that could occur in the largest printed public forums.

When the NAACP demanded and received airtime on WRVA, it had a chance to humanize the organization for those [white] listeners whose only other exposure to it may have been through the heavily biased accounts in the white printed press. Oliver Hill was not only a member of the NAACP, but also a prominent black Richmonder who had powerful ties to the white business community.⁷⁶ Hill was not a boogeyman, but a local citizen engaged in reasonable dialogue. The station granted airtime to an unscripted, interracial conversation that presumed desegregation inevitable and desirable. Undoubtedly, many of WRVA’s listeners were unconvinced, perhaps having previously been persuaded by the arguments of the anti-desegregationists. But also undoubtedly, many other listeners found Hill’s and Lupton’s image of voluntarily desegregated schools plausible. At the very least, the 1953 NAACP roundtable could proceed without open hostility and vilification.

⁷⁵ In a little less than four weeks in August and September of 1956, the General Assembly passed seven laws targeting the NAACP. The NAACP had filed more school desegregation lawsuits in Virginia than in any other state, and the legislators singled out the organization for vindictive harassment. The *News Leader*, too, vilified the NAACP as the source of the desegregation “problem.” See Robert Pratt’s careful analysis of the anti-NAACP campaign in Pratt, *The Color of Their Skin*, 7-9.

⁷⁶ He was a prominent member of the Richmond Citizens’ Association that reformed municipal government in 1948, as described in chap. 4, “Big Hillbilly Operation.”

The NAACP roundtable is a good example of the ways that WRVA was already experimenting with approaches to local news that set it apart from print journalism in general, and the local white press in particular prior to the late 1950s and 1960s when “massive resistance” and civil rights activism reached a crescendo. WRVA’s affiliation with CBS, as well as the station management’s desire to maintain that affiliation, meant that no matter the personal opinions of WRVA officials, the station would always provide space for at least a handful of different opinions on the news of the day. The different originations of the news coverage diluted the possibility of regional myopia, forcing any local narratives into a broader context. Moreover, as the NAACP broadcast indicates, WRVA set an early precedent of adhering to industry standards of fairness in news coverage when it came to potentially sensitive discussions of southern race relations. The station did not invite Oliver Hill and the roundtable participants, but broadcasters nevertheless complied with the NAACP’s request for airtime and broadcast the program without alteration. The station’s cautious approach to the airing of potentially controversial topics, and its commitment to national network broadcasting, created a space that African American listeners and leaders could use to complicate white perceptions of desegregation efforts.

*

The political and social turbulence of “massive resistance” in the late 1950s and the widespread civil rights protests of the early 1960s forced WRVA officials to make difficult programming decisions: would they maintain their commitment to policies of fairness in reporting, and to national news

programming, in a climate of white fear and hysteria? Or would station officials begin infusing news programming with their own editorial opinions, as the local white press did? In 1941, the FCC had issued a new policy that “Freedom of speech on the radio must be broad enough to provide full and equal opportunity for the presentation to the public of all sides of public issues...The public interest – not the private – is paramount.”⁷⁷ The FCC’s Mayflower Decision, as the policy was called, prohibited radio stations from on-air editorialization of any sort. But in 1949 the FCC reversed itself, permitting stations to editorialize – and in fact encouraging them to “present issues of controversy in their communities” – so long as they offered time for an opposing point of view.⁷⁸ WRVA, like many radio stations of the time, recognized the potential for a more hands-on approach to news reporting than had been possible a decade earlier, and began shifting its programming accordingly. Along with “straight” local and national news, the station began adding innovative call-in shows and news-and-entertainment programs in the mid-1950s that revolutionized the ways that the “Voice of Virginia” and its listeners could comment on or engage with current affairs. The narratives of the civil rights era that emerged from this new programming were still slanted heavily toward the views of conservative white Virginians. But in the end, WRVA’s commitment to professional codes of ethics, continued pressure from African Americans and liberal or moderate whites, and its own pronounced

⁷⁷ The FCC’s new policy was a direct result of the Roosevelt administration’s fears of anti-New Deal industrialists’ power to influence public opinion via the airwaves. Matthew Lasar, *Pacific Radio: The Rise of an Alternative Network*, updated ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 47.

⁷⁸ The policy of permitting on-air time for rebuttals was universally referred to as the “Fairness Doctrine.” Robert L. Hilliard and Michael C. Keith, *The Broadcast Century and Beyond: A Biography of American Broadcasting*, 5th ed. (Burlington, MA: Elsevier, 2010), 119.

civic mission of uplift for the community required the station to provide the space for a nominally balanced perspective on all civil rights initiatives.

The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) was the private, professional institution that governed radio broadcasting.⁷⁹ Calvin Lucy helped write the Radio Code of Standard Practices early in his career, which became the basis for standards of fair broadcasting that the Federal Communications Commission adopted later. On the matter of “Controversial Public Issues,” the NAB declared in 1939:

As part of their public service, networks and stations shall provide time for the presentation of public questions including those of controversial nature...Broadcasters shall use their best efforts to allot such time with fairness to all elements in a given controversy.⁸⁰

The NAB’s professional standard of fairness was neither unusual nor remarkable; print journalists had similar standards. But WRVA perhaps took its obligations more seriously than other broadcasting stations for two reasons: the station manager had written the code and occupied a top position in the association, and the code itself was an affirmation of WRVA’s avowed civic mission.

In 1950, looking back on twenty-five years of service, Calvin Lucy wrote “from that eventful day when the ‘Voice of Virginia’ assumed its rightful place in the skywaves of radio, WRVA has steadfastly recognized its opportunity and

⁷⁹ The National Association of Broadcasting was formed in 1922, and had dedicated itself to pushing through a commercial system of radio broadcasting. When the Communications Act of 1934 institutionalized commercial broadcasting, the newly-formed Federal Radio Commission (later the FCC) adopted many of the policy and industry standards that the NAB had already articulated. The NAB was particularly influential in defining a “Code of Ethics” for radio broadcasters. Smulyan, *Selling Radio*, 141-142. A discussion of the debate about commercial v. non-profit models of broadcasting can be found at the beginning of chap. 2 “50,000 Watts of Noise: The Rise of Calvin T. Lucy.”

⁸⁰ The Radio Code of Standard Practices was adopted July 11, 1939; it went into effect in October 1939. *National Association of Broadcasters Code*, “Controversial Public Issues,” UVA: WRVA Radio.

responsibilities and diligently pursued a policy of service to mankind...Our constant objective is to undertake those services which we conscientiously feel are to the best interests of our citizens.”⁸¹ WRVA’s twenty-fifth anniversary booklet highlighted several instances of the station’s “service to mankind,” including the station’s extensive election coverage, fundraising campaigns for local charities and war bonds, and the donation of airtime to religious services. In 1950, the station defined “uplift” as any service that would promote the establishment of an informed, religious, and self-helping community that station officials idealized.

But by the end of the decade, WRVA officials and employees had subtly expanded their news programs with round-tables, on-air editorials, and *conversations* with the public, all of which would presumably enrich what the NAB called “the fundamental purpose of news dissemination in a democracy”: the informed citizen.⁸² Hoisted by their own principled petards and facing both implicit and overt pressure from the national networks and African American listeners, WRVA’s news narratives diverged from the narratives of the local white press in the mid-1950s. As early as 1953, WRVA was experimenting with “controversial” programming, which included any programming explicitly discussing sex, race, or vice. While the station continued to implement a general strategy of “studied neutrality,” the News Department was also developing an editorial edge.⁸³ Across the tumultuous years of “massive resistance”, WRVA officials gradually took on responsibility for analysis, rather than simply providing

⁸¹ *WRVA’s 25th Anniversary*, VCU: Lucy Papers.

⁸² *National Association of Broadcasters Code*, “News,” 1939, UVA: WRVA Radio.

⁸³ MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV*, 70-71.

information. They also launched programs that gave listeners the responsibility for limited analysis as well. Although the editorials and analysis were aired separately from the “hard” news programs, they nonetheless complicated the discussion of desegregation and civil rights in significant ways.

Listeners approached WRVA as a source of information in the turbulent years of the late 1950s and early 1960s. For one thing, news reports came from both the network studios as well as WRVA’s studios, diluting the power of a monolithic regional perspective. Many of WRVA’s programs also included unscripted, phone-in segments, in which listeners called the station to pose questions or comments on the air. Although a majority of contributors often voiced a common opinion, there was rarely consensus. Furthermore, through both fan mail and letters of complaint, WRVA’s listeners pressured the station to tailor its programming to their own interests and preferences. Naturally, the station could not please everyone so instead relied on a policy of offering what they considered to be a reasonable variety of programming. And by championing and seeking “variety,” station officials often entertained suggestions for news programming that had less rigid parameters than newspapers. Competing demands on WRVA’s information gathering and reporting meant that WRVA was more of an information *broker* than an information purveyor. People of all races and ages were listening and asking questions, and WRVA revised its model of news reporting in response to audience interest and concern.

At the same time that *Brown* brought the legal foundations of Jim Crow to the point of crisis, WRVA began experimenting with its approach to information

dissemination and interpretation. *Sideviews on the News* and later the interactive *Open for Opinion* encouraged listeners to take an active role in journalism. The *Sideviews* format transformed a listener into an explorer or investigator, while *Open for Opinion* gave listeners a chance to assume the role of interviewer. By empowering listener interaction with their news programs, WRVA officials challenged their own authority as information-givers. Although WRVA still claimed authority in news programming, the experimental news programs of the late 1950s and 1960s – either intentionally or unintentionally – created space for alternate constructions of authority to emerge. And across WRVA's airwaves came the voices of Virginians who were not often represented in the [white] mainstream media. The questions they asked and the stories they told derailed the campaign for consensus that "massive resistance" needed to survive.

In 1956, WRVA's Radio News Editor Jack Clements added a new type of news program to the line-up.⁸⁴ He called the show *Sideviews on the News*, and billed the fifteen-minute program as a supplement to the straight-up daily news shows. *Sideviews* was "designed to round out" the day's narrative, with its brief exploration of "stories of the unusual and the commonplace."⁸⁵ WRVA needed

⁸⁴ The first program for which I have a reference is dated February 19, 1956. *Sideviews* reported on the 30th Anniversary Luncheon for Brotherhood Week, at which WRVA won an award for its role in raising money for the Crippled Children's Hospital. CD-389, "Sideviews on the News: 30th Anniversary Luncheon for Brotherhood Week," 1956, LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁸⁵ The quotations are from the common introduction to *Sideviews on the News*. Clements also described his show as offering "background on today's top news" or, if the show examined a topic he considered "unusual," he would claim they (meaning him and his listeners) were taking "a time out from the heavy headlines." See CD-141: "Sideviews on the News: Virginia General Assembly Public Hearings on School Legislation, 5-6 Sept. 1956," LVA: WRVA Radio. A native of Spartanburg, South Carolina, Clements was a rising star for WRVA in 1956. He had gotten his college degree in Advertising from Wofford College and gone on to work for radio stations in

fresh ideas in the mid-1950s as television was becoming the dominant mass medium in the U.S. and demands for news programming were changing, and Clements's new show offered energy and innovation. *Sideviews* ran anywhere from ten to thirty minutes, focusing on a topic that could range from the seemingly trivial to multi-part series on General Assembly legislation. Although Clements sometimes deviated from his patterns, he generally stuck to two general formats for *Sideviews*. He was fond of lifting excerpts from speeches or events recorded in their entirety for WRVA News, and then crafting a narrative to link the sound-bites together for the listener. He would also, less frequently, take his show on the road to interview Virginians whom the listeners might otherwise never meet. He was one of the first reporters to approach Albertis Harrison, for example, after Harrison became the Democratic nominee (and thus the heir-apparent) for governor in 1961, and WRVA broadcast their brief exchange live on the air. But on slower news days, Clements introduced listeners to workers at the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company of Virginia, or a Lie-Detector test administrator – people who were interesting because they were normally invisible. Presumably, Clements was hoping to net a wider audience by switching between traditional reporting and “unusual” stories that hinted at sensationalism and exposé. Clements advanced the main news narrative on some days, and ignored it on others. Such a format subtly undermined the

Spartanburg, Union City, and Anderson, before landing a job as News Editor at WWNC, Asheville, North Carolina. John Tansey, “Announcing New WRVA Radio Employees,” 1956, memorandum, LVA: WRVA Radio.

authority of the daily or weekly news program and encouraged listeners to think beyond the daily talking points.⁸⁶

For the first few months, *Sideviews* stuck to topics that preserved the cultural or moral authority of middle-class white men – unsurprising, given the background of WRVA's employees. Perhaps in an effort to maintain their own cultural and political authority in an era of escalating challenges, for example, the WRVA News Department used *Sideviews* to celebrate the centennial of the Civil War. *Sideviews* eulogized Lee's surrender on its fifty-first anniversary, airing excerpts of a speech given by the late Douglas Freeman from the site of surrender at the McQueen House in 1950. Clements refrained from overt editorialization, preferring to let Freeman do the memorializing ("anything that this reporter might add now would be anti-climactic"), but he did select and read a poem by "a Southern sympathizer" named Percy Greg who was "lament[ing] England's not coming to the aid of the Confederacy" to conclude the program.⁸⁷

Celebrating the Confederacy was a time-honored strategy for reasserting white authority over blacks, as Grace Hale, Caroline Janney, and Leon Litwack have argued.⁸⁸ Asserting cultural authority was a critical component of

⁸⁶ As discussed in chap. 4, "Big Hillbilly Operation," the combined effects of television and radio network restructuring left radio stations in the lurch for programming of all sorts. Just as WRVA invested heavily in local entertainment programming, it also moved toward increased local news programming. Michael Keith argues that "radio had undergone a 180-degree turn [in the mid 1950s], even before the medium gave up trying to directly compete on a pay-for-program basis with television. By the time radio set a new and vivifying course for itself by programming for specific segments of the listening audience, local newscasts were the norm." Michael C. Keith, *The Radio Station: Broadcast, Satellite, and Internet*, 8th ed. (Burlington, MA: Focus Press, 2010), 160.

⁸⁷ CD-158: "Sideviews on the News: Anniversary of Lee's Surrender, 18 April 1956," LVA: WRVA Radio. I believe the LVA archivists have mislabeled this CD. The program was broadcast on April 8, 1956.

⁸⁸ Hale, *Making Whiteness*; Caroline E. Janney, *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies' Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Leon F.

maintaining political hegemony in the mid-century South. For decades, white middle- and upper-class men had established regulatory bodies like the Censorship Board to promote cultural norms in the best interest of elite white southerners, as both Melissa Ooten and Pippa Holloway have demonstrated persuasively.⁸⁹ From one perspective, *Sideviews* was a continuation of that tradition: using history and radio news as mechanisms of control. But *Sideviews* explored other, non-traditional topics as well, some of which engaged with southern social taboos like sex and race. Controversial topics subtly undermined the systems of hegemonic cultural power that Ooten and Holloway describe in early to mid-century Virginia. "Controversial" programming was no doubt intended to attract listeners through the use of sensationalism, but it also established a precedent for vigorous debate.

When Virginia found itself at the center of the debate over desegregation, Jack Clements used *Sideviews* as a forum for more in-depth analysis than either the white newspapers or WRVA's "straight" news programs offered. The newspapers and the radio news programs reported on legislative responses to *Brown*, but *Sideviews* put together a three-part series on the General Assembly hearings over the Gray Plan that brought speeches made for and against the plan directly into listeners' living rooms. The Gray Plan was the Virginia General Assembly's first real response to *Brown*, and Virginians of all races were paying

Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

⁸⁹ For more information on cultural authority and politics, see Melissa D. Ooten, "Screen Strife: Race, Gender, and Movie Censorship in the New South, 1922-1955," Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary (2005). See also Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia*, chap. 2: Disciplining Sexual Behavior, 52-76.

close attention.⁹⁰ Clements commented on each speech he aired, though he gave the speakers uninterrupted sound clips, so they sounded just as they had on the floor of the General Assembly.

Where the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and the *Richmond News Leader* vilified the NAACP as self-interested and greedy instigators of unnecessary strife for white folks in the fall of 1956, *Sideviews on the News* broadcast the speech of Lester Banks, representing the state branch of the NAACP, as part of its series.⁹¹ Banks was opposed to the Gray Plan or any other plan other than integration, and so was a white woman named Adele Clark, who spoke on behalf of the Richmond Diocese of Catholic Women.⁹² *Sideviews* gave more air time to segregationists like State Delegate J. Randolph Tucker of Richmond and former governor Colgate Darden than to those people who wanted to see swift implementation of *Brown*, but Clements's inter-text narration was remarkably neutral. At the very least, Clements did not appear to be taking sides. He referred to Darden's diatribe against federal authority as "quite a stirring speech...he had them hanging on every word," but he added, "whether he

⁹⁰ State Senator Garland Gray, a man *Time* magazine referred to as "a dependable cog in U.S. Senator Harry Byrd's Democratic Party Organization," chaired a commission on school desegregation at the request of Virginia Governor Thomas Stanley. The Commission was populated mainly by legislators from Virginia's so-called Black Belt region, the southern and southeastern portions of the state with the highest numbers of African American residents. The plan would have made desegregation the responsibility of local school districts, and would have provided tuition grants for white students to attend private schools if they refused to attend an integrated public school. Garland Gray announced his plan to the public in November 1955, and voters could cast their ballots in a popular referendum in January to call a state convention that would legislate the plan. "Virginia Creeper," *Time* (Jan. 2, 1956). See also Lassiter and Lewis, eds., *The Moderates' Dilemma*, 6.

⁹¹ Pratt, *The Color of Their Skin*, 7-9.

⁹² Adele Clark had been a prominent member of the woman suffrage movement in Virginia in the 1910s. For more about her legacy of activism, see Green, *Southern Strategies*, 157, 176, 177.

convinced [the General Assembly to adopt the Gray Plan] or not is another question.”⁹³

Though he refrained from commenting on the anti-segregation forces, Clements did not speak disrespectfully of them, either, as state delegates were doing on the floor of the General Assembly. Although Clements ended the three-part series with the speech of J.S. Grabbet, a Byrd machine judge from Nottoway who also sat on the University of Virginia Board of Visitors, railing against the NAACP as an organization “drunk with power, [going] about this Commonwealth, threatening one community after another,” the fact that he had afforded Banks and Clarke the right of uninterrupted debate prevented WRVA’s radio news from presenting the united front against integration that the white newspapers were crafting.⁹⁴ Clements was almost certainly not trying to be a rebel. But Calvin T. Lucy, William Reed, and John Tansey reminded WRVA employees daily that they were providing a public service of cultural uplift and enrichment for their listeners. Professional and ethical considerations about fairness demanded that, unless WRVA wanted to break with the Code of Ethics that Calvin Lucy had helped write for the NAB, and unless WRVA wanted to revise its commitment to public service, Jack Clements and his news team had an obligation to open their news shows to people on *all* sides of the school desegregation controversy.

Sideviews did not limit its exploration of “uncomfortable” topics to school desegregation. Every few weeks, Clements invited speakers to talk about matters rarely discussed frankly and publicly, such as female sexuality or birth

⁹³ CD-141, “*Sideviews on the News*, Virginia General Assembly Public Hearings on School Legislation, 5-6 Sept. 1956,” LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

control. Station manager John Tansey and Public Relations Director Walter Bishop tried to identify “controversial” episodes of *Sideviews* ahead of time, so that they might head off some of the criticism by also inviting at least one speaker of an opposing view.⁹⁵

Even hinting at white female sexuality flew in the face of dozens of racial and gender taboos in the South, so when *Sideviews* ran an episode on birth control in December 1959, the station tread carefully. *Sideviews* was covering a public forum on birth control, sponsored by the Catholic Position’s Guide of Richmond, and WRVA newsman Lon Bachman had invited the speakers to summarize the debate ahead of time. Bachman, standing in for Jack Clements, couched birth control in religious terms, opening the program with Pope John XXIII’s recent statement in opposition to birth control.

The forum had invited two Catholic men, Father Anthony Zimmerman, a self-professed expert on “Over-Population,” and Dr. John R. Cavanaugh, a psychiatrist from Catholic University in Washington, D.C. Zimmerman started by debunking alarmist fears about overpopulation in a fast-growing world, using statistics to explain why rapid growth was only temporary, and would not be a problem in the long-term. The closest Zimmerman came to frank discussion of birth control was his assertion that “Christian solutions for over-population problems are superior in every respect to artificial birth prevention.” He never mentioned sex or birth control again, except oblique references to hypothetical fertility rates. Cavanaugh’s position was much more sensational, by the

⁹⁵ When Clements was preparing to air an episode on “Over-Population,” featuring a speaker from the Catholic Physicians Guild, Tansey recommended also inviting the Planned Parenthood League. John Tansey to WRB and Jack Clements, Dec. 8, 1959, UVA: WRVA Radio.

standards of the time. He argued that sex was an important component of basic human health and should not be restricted (within marriage, presumably):

Well, basically, my idea in regard to the psychology of birth prevention is that since the sex act is in the, at its end, for the purpose of the procreation of children, that anything that frustrates this end is going to produce frustration in the individual, with its whole chain of rather serious consequences which follows from this frustration.⁹⁶

Although Cavanaugh used mostly male pronouns, he was otherwise careful to adopt a gender-neutral tone. He identified abstinence within marriage (a couple's response to fears of pregnancy) with unhappiness and high divorce rates. Without sex uniting them, spouses could become confused, frustrated, and even hostile to one another. Such a belief was common among psychiatrists and doctors in the 1950s, but frank recognition of a [white] woman's *need* for sex was rarely articulated in southern media.⁹⁷ The conversation was professional and didactic to the point of ennui, but the very hint of "natural" female sexuality, not circumscribed by race or class, undercut the logic of "massive resistance" stump speeches about white men's duty to protect white southern women from allegedly uncontrollable black lust.⁹⁸ Cavanaugh suggested married women needed regular sex for their mental health, and ignored race altogether *as if it were not a factor*. WRVA's News Department was not trying to confront and dismember southern gender and racial taboos that pivoted on the issue of white

⁹⁶ CD-511: "Sideviews on the News: Birth Control," Dec. 14, 1959, LVA: WRVA Radio.

⁹⁷ Jeffrey P. Moran, *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 170. For an excellent overview of the sudden rise of fears about overpopulation in the late 1950s and early 1960s, please see Michael Smith, "The Short Life of a Dark Prophecy," in *Fear Itself: Enemies Real and Imagined in American Culture*, edited by Nancy Lusignan Schultz (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1998), 341-343.

⁹⁸ Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Race, and Resistance – A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010). See in particular chap. 7, "Sex and Civil Rights," 174-201.

female sexuality, but the program poked a hole in the cultural dam shoring up the white southern political system.⁹⁹

WRVA may have chosen to air controversial programming in the late 1950s and beyond because the news team hoped “controversial” or sensational programming would attract more listeners than it would alienate. As WRVA relied more and more on local advertising revenue, a large, local audience was the key to their continued financial solvency. Regardless of their intentions, creating a regular space for multi-sided conversation about “controversy,” and frankly exploring topics like birth control and female sexuality that had previously been taboo in the local public discourse changed the tenor of WRVA’s radio news dramatically in the late 1950s. In addition to the dry recitation of the day’s events on the noon and evening news shows, WRVA now also invited *analysis* through its supplemental news programming, especially of difficult topics. Listeners responded positively to *Sideviews*, and were so enthusiastic in their correspondence with the station that the News Department began to consider the possibility of having the listeners provide the analysis.

Though *Sideviews* confronted widely acknowledged political maelstroms like school desegregation, and occasionally delved into “sensational” topics like

⁹⁹ Historians Alison Bashford and Carolyn Strange have explored “‘mass’ sexual pedagogy” through mass radio broadcasts given by “experts” on sex and sexuality in the early to mid-twentieth century. Bashford and Strange found that well-respected sex educators who published extensively in popular magazines could not address the same topics, even with “far less explicit information about sex and reproduction,” on the radio. Subjects that were accepted in printed formats were unacceptable to the point of censorship via airwaves, causing Bashford and Strange to conclude “that the history of sex education is as much the history of communication as it is the history of sexuality or the history of education.” Bashford and Strange are students of Australian history, but their point has relevance for American broadcasting history as well, and serves to underscore the risk WRVA was taking with airing this episode at all. While seemingly minor, the decision could have had weighty consequences. Alison Bashford and Carolyn Strange, “Public Pedagogy: Sex Education and Mass Community in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 13, no. 1 (January 2004): 71-99, quotations from pp. 74-75.

sexuality or birth control, WRVA's next generation of news programs engaged with traditionally taboo topics more directly. *Open for Opinion* went on the air in September 1961, and ran weekdays from 2:10 to 3PM. Station literature described the show as "a public affairs program which immediately met with wide acceptance." WRVA pitched its program as an on-air Letter-to-the Editor page, where the "editor" was usually a guest. Listeners could phone in with their questions, which the guest in the "hot seat" would answer live on the air. If there was no special guest, the broadcast would be a moderated conversation between callers. "When the program concept was first originated, it was felt that such a series would fill a void in Richmond and Virginia radio broadcasting," claimed WRVA at the end of the show's first year.¹⁰⁰

The program was moderated by WRVA newsman Frank Brooks, who determined the topics a week in advance "in consultation with the program director and with the approval of the station manager."¹⁰¹ The station attempted to balance "light" and "more serious" topics. "The Proposed Widening and Deepening of the James River," for example, aired between "Would the United States be Justified in Sinking Cuba-Bound, Offensive Bearing Russian Vessels?" and "The Presidential Ban on Discrimination."¹⁰² In the first full year on the air, *Open for Opinion* had forty-seven guests, plus a special broadcast where all nine members of the Richmond City Council had a hotline to the station if they wanted to get anything off their chests. The first year's guests included four women, five sitting politicians, three Medical College of Virginia physicians, four local

¹⁰⁰ "UPI 1962 Awards Entry – WRVA Radio, Best Community Awareness," LVA: WRVA Radio.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

educators, and two ministers, among others. W. Lester Banks, Executive Secretary of the Virginia NAACP, sat in the hot seat while listeners debated “Is the NAACP Serving the Best Interests of the American Negro?” Banks was followed by T. Coleman Andrews a few weeks later when *Open for Opinion* asked listeners “What is Your Opinion of the John Birch Society?” Some of the questions were leading (“Should the Government Get Out of the Farm?”) while others were broad to the point of aimlessness (“What is Your Opinion of Television?”). WRVA was proud enough of their show that they nominated it for a United Press International Award for a program facilitating “Best Community Awareness.”¹⁰³

The call-in show was risky for the simple reason that the material was less scripted than the round-tables and on-the-street interviews Jack Clements conducted in *Sideviews*. Calls were taken live and put on the air with no tape delay, unlike *Sideviews* which was pre-recorded and edited. Brooks and the guest in the “hot seat” had little time to compose responses to the callers, some of whom asked uncomfortable or even rude questions. *Open for Opinion* provided a 50,000-watt, unfiltered, public forum for listeners who wanted to initiate, resolve, continue, or otherwise shape debate on current events. In the early 1960s, *Open for Opinion* solidified WRVA's position as a knowledge broker, and listeners seized the opportunity to be part of the exchange.

In the fall of 1961, the citizens of the City of Richmond and Henrico County contemplated a massive plan known simply as “Merger.” Under the plan, Richmond would expand its boundaries into the predominantly rural Henrico

¹⁰³ 1962 Guest List, in “UPI Entry, 1962,” LVA: WRVA Radio.

County, giving the city more room for commercial and industrial development and county residents increased access to public services. The debate over Merger dominated the local news for several months, as city and county residents aired their fears and expectations of local government. *Open for Opinion* plunged into the middle of the debate with a six-part series featuring opponents and proponents of the measure on alternate days every day for a week.

Brooks opened the show by asking the day's guest to "tell why he feels as he feels" in three minutes or less, as telephone operators began queuing up callers.¹⁰⁴ F. Henry Garber, a member of Richmond's City Council, sat in the hot seat on November 30 and made the argument that "we have not intelligently used the talents that we have, and that before we start asking for more talents we should prove that we know what to do with the ones that we have." He withheld support for Merger mostly for fiscal reasons; he opposed the city borrowing money to pay Henrico for their public buildings. Once Garber had said his piece, Brooks turned the show over to callers. The callers expressed support for Merger by a margin of sixteen to seven, with one caller undecided. For the first twenty minutes or so, listeners were mostly concerned with the financing of Merger, as the city already carried debt and they were worried about higher taxes. The callers raised few objections to Merger on anything but economic grounds, until an African American caller added his voice.

About halfway through the program, Brooks announced "The East Line is buzzing now!," which was coded language to let listeners know the next caller

¹⁰⁴ CD-405 "Open for Opinion," Nov. 30, 1961, LVA: WRVA Radio.

was from Richmond's predominantly black neighborhood.¹⁰⁵ Reverend Sinclair Hopkins called from his church in Church Hill, expressing two concerns. He disliked the totalitarian nature of a sign he had seen with a red hand that read "Vote for Merger." But more importantly, he claimed:

Being a Negro, I'm concerned about whether or not this would further disenfranchise the Negro who is poorly represented in our city and state already. And this could be, I'm not sure if this a scheme to gerrymand, to redistrict or reapportion the population to disenfranchise the Negro.¹⁰⁶

Hopkins's concerns were legitimate. The *Richmond News Leader* had plainly stated in 1958 that the city would have to annex areas of surrounding counties if city leadership was to remain in white hands, an editorial that was reprinted in the *Richmond Afro-American*.¹⁰⁷ Black voters already faced an uphill battle with poll taxes and widespread voter registration intimidation.¹⁰⁸ At the time, City Council elections were decided by outright pluralities, meaning the nine candidates receiving the most votes won. The City of Richmond had a much higher proportion of African American residents than Henrico County. By adding Henrico residents to the electorate, City Council would be diluting the inchoate black vote.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Richmond's African American population was concentrated in two areas, one of which was the city's east end, including portions of Church Hill.

¹⁰⁶ CD-405: "Open for Opinion," Nov. 30, 1961, LVA: WRVA Radio.

¹⁰⁷ *Richmond News Leader*, "Moves Across a Southern Chess Board." As cited in Lewis A. Randolph and Gayle T. Tate, *Rights for a Season: The Politics of Race, Class, and Gender in Richmond, Virginia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 166.

¹⁰⁸ At the same time that Richmond and Henrico debated Merger, civil rights organizations were mounting a major offensive on poll taxes in southern states designed to limit African American and working-class white voting. Virginia's state and local poll taxes remained in place until the federal courts ruled them unconstitutional in *Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections* (1966).

¹⁰⁹ In 1970, worried about the possibility of a black majority on City Council, white city leaders annexed a portion of Chesterfield County, including 47,000 middle-class whites. In *Richmond v. United States* (1974), the U.S. Supreme Court concurred with the Richmond Crusade of Voters' charge that the gerrymandering was intentional and effective at diluting the black vote. In a second case, *Richmond v. United States* (1977), the U.S. Supreme Court proposed the city

Garber blustered about bully tactics in campaign signs before addressing Hopkins's implication of gerrymandering. "In spite of the fact that they [African Americans] apparently didn't think much of me in the last election," Garber said, "one of the suggestions that I had during the Merger discussions was that we go back to this ward system and set the line so that the Nigras would be guaranteed a vote or a member of Council."¹¹⁰ Garber's candid response did not refute Hopkins's assertion that city leaders were concerned with redistricting the black vote. Indeed, the offer to establish a "token" seat on City Council was a frank admission of the councilman's expectation that black voters would continue to have limited power in city politics despite their large numbers.¹¹¹ Because of the program format, Hopkins did not get a follow-up question, and the next two callers asked questions about the legality of Merger and annexation. The effect of Merger on the black community was not mentioned again, but Hopkins's addition to the conversation had already forced the white councilman and white listeners to consider the racial dimensions of political decisions, at least momentarily. Black Richmonders were also listening, apparently, as African Americans began calling *Open for Opinion* in higher numbers over the next month. Like Hopkins had done with Garber, future black callers prevented the

change its at-large elections to a district system. Richmond's local elections are still run on a district system. For an excellent explanation of these cases and their origins, please see Randolph and Tate, *Rights for a Season*.

¹¹⁰ CD-405: "Open for Opinion," Nov. 30, 1961, LVA: WRVA Radio.

¹¹¹ Oliver Hill was the first African American on City Council since Reconstruction when he won a spot through the at-large election in 1949.

guest in the “hot seat” from ignoring the ways in which race was intimately connected to politics and power in Virginia.¹¹²

Governor Lindsay Almond was “good enough, and perhaps brave enough” to join Frank Brooks at the microphones of *Open for Opinion* on January 5, 1962, to take questions from callers about the last four years of his administration.¹¹³ Almond’s term was quickly coming to a close, and the program provided both citizens and the governor to reflect on the decisions he had made in office. In 1957, Almond had run a gubernatorial campaign that was “peppered with declarations of out-and-out segregationist intent.”¹¹⁴ While on the campaign trail, he famously raised his arm and passionately averred he would have it cut off before he permitted integration of Virginia’s public schools.¹¹⁵ Once in office, he had been a staunch defender of segregated schools, and – as Edward R. Murrow explored in his “Lost Class of ’59” documentary – had gone so far as to close public schools rather than accept even token integration. But by the end of 1961 “massive resistance” had become a burden to him. While his extreme position on desegregation had won him Byrd’s endorsement and therefore the Governor’s Mansion in 1957, it could not stand in court. Shortly after the

¹¹² Just as a matter of interest, while more than two-thirds of Richmonders voted for Merger, and residents of the parts of Henrico closest to the city voted for it, a majority of Henrico residents voted against it and Merger failed. After the election, the City of Richmond filed an annexation lawsuit to force the merge anyway. Three years later, the courts ruled that Richmond could have a portion of Henrico if it paid the county \$55 million. City Council balked at the price tag and the City of Richmond and Henrico County remain separate municipalities. Dabney, *Richmond: The Story of a City*, 338.

¹¹³ George Brooks introduced Almond as being “good enough, and perhaps brave enough, to join us today to answer your questions by telephone.” CD-406: “Open for Opinion,” Jan. 5, 1962, LVA: WRVA Radio.

¹¹⁴ George Lewis, *“Massive Resistance”: The White Response to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Hodder Arnold, 2006): 54.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* Lewis notes that Almond was deliberately mimicking the rhetoric of Virginian Edmund Randolph at the 1787 Constitution Convention. Randolph said he would have rather lost his arm than seen the nation dissolve.

interview with Edward R. Murrow, federal and state courts ruled that school closings were unconstitutional. Almond took a week to pull his thoughts together after the ruling, then “publicly consigned Virginia’s school closing to the state’s political past” in a speech to Virginians conceding defeat for “massive resistance”.¹¹⁶ Once he conceded the illegality and impracticality of “massive resistance,” many of his allies left him, including Harry Byrd. In an interview after Almond left office, Byrd remarked of the governor:

I just don’t understand him. He could have become the hero of the people of the South. . He could have taken over more power in Virginia than I have ever had...Yes, old Lindsay should have gone to jail. The people of Virginia would have come to the jail and serenaded him and brought him good things to eat.¹¹⁷

Almond spent the remainder of his term conducting damage control in Virginia’s public education system, and with the state’s Democratic party. He had alienated the hardline segregationists and acted in opposition to the machine’s primary political platform. In the meantime, many if not most Virginians – white and black – were appalled by the decision to close the schools, so Almond was unpopular with just about everyone when he came to WRVA’s microphones on January 5, 1962. He said he was relieved to be done hauling this particular “cross-cut railroad tie.”¹¹⁸

Men, women, and children phoned in, taking advantage of the opportunity to speak directly with the governor. Callers asked Almond to explain his positions on public education, the Byrd machine, taxation, the Supreme Court, and the incoming governor. Almond, one of the best orators of mid-century

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 114.

¹¹⁷ “Byrd Bore Power without Pretense,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 23 Oct. 1966, B1.

¹¹⁸ CD-406: “Open for Opinion,” Jan. 5, 1962, LVA: WRVA Radio.

Virginia, handled even the toughest questions skillfully and eloquently, ending every statement with a passionate crescendo. But despite Almond's adept attempts at parrying criticism, the callers continued to press him on his decisions, especially regarding school desegregation. As the program unfolded, callers articulated a complex dialogue of race, politics, and civic responsibility.

When a thirteen-year-old boy from Chesterfield County asked Almond what he thought was the "most important thing that happened during this term," Almond answered without hesitation: public education.

We have gone farther in the field of public education in this administration than ever before, it's on solid ground and I'm sure that we can look forward to seeing real, genuine opportunities afforded to all the boys and girls of Virginia who try to be educated and who are capable of taking an education.¹¹⁹

John T. Martin, a white man calling from the Fan District in Richmond, did not accept this answer. Martin asked Frank Brooks "why is it that [Almond] is so completely satisfied with the education systems in the state of Virginia when there are schools in Prince Edward County that are closed?"¹²⁰ Almond replied, "'Rome wasn't built in a day and it wasn't burnt down in a day.'" Martin's question articulated the concern that ultimately eroded support for "massive resistance" among all but the staunchest segregationists: maintaining segregation was not worth closing down public schools. Almond had dodged the question with characteristic eloquence, but Almond could not erase Martin's criticism. In that moment in early 1962, a white man openly challenged the governor on "massive

¹¹⁹ The caller identified himself as Rudy Thurston. CD-406: "Open for Opinion," Jan. 5, 1962, LVA: WRVA Radio.

¹²⁰ Martin does not identify himself as a white man, but black homeownership in the Fan District was almost nonexistent at the time. Moreover, Frank Brooks tended to identify African American callers as "Negro." Ibid.

resistance”, and he did it over 50,000-watt airwaves. WRVA’s experiment with news programming formats enabled Virginia citizens to debate politics toe-to-toe with the most elite political leaders. Machine politics and a deferential media had discouraged unscripted public debates in the postwar years, especially over race relations, but *Open for Opinion*’s format actively encouraged debate. Even elderly statesmen like J. Lindsay Almond were not safe.

Martin was not the only caller to challenge Almond on the air, though other callers were more subtle in their criticism. At least three African Americans called to ask the governor about racial politics, and the governor gave surprisingly candid answers, perhaps because of the program format. The first caller was the Reverend Sinclair Hopkins from Church Hill, asking Governor Almond why he took the American flag off the top of the Capitol in 1958.¹²¹ Most observers – black and white – believed he had done so as a symbolic rejection of federal authority.¹²² Though Almond denied any connection between “massive resistance” and the disappearance of the national flag at the Capitol at the time, a claim he repeated on *Open for Opinion*, most observers in 1958 did not buy his explanation. Given that the flag controversy had been over for some time by 1962, Hopkins’s question seems oddly narrow and irrelevant to current matters of interest. But in raising the question – albeit in a civil manner – Hopkins was

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² “Old Glory Comes Out on Top,” *Ocala (FL) Star-Banner*, Dec. 3, 1958, 14. In the midst of school-closing controversy, one reporter asked Almond about the removal of the American flag from the Capitol some days previously. Almond would eventually have a special platform built over the General Assembly building with the state flag on one side and the American flag on the other. He made it clear, however, that the flags must fly at equal levels. “‘I respect, I worship the flag of my country,’ the Governor said, but he declared that the state-owned buildings would not be permitted to fly the United States flag over the Virginia flag. State and national flags should be displayed at equal levels, with preference given the state flag when only one staff was available.”

reminding listeners of Almond's commitment to "states' rights," which was the coded refrain used by many segregationists. He was also reminding listeners that, in the end, the state flag could not fly alone over the Capitol.

The second African American caller, David M. Burton from Henrico County, was more direct in forcing the governor to address racial politics: "Does Governor Harrison coming up have as many friends in the Negro race as you have?"¹²³ Burton did not qualify his question, so we cannot know exactly what he meant. He may have been complimenting the outgoing governor (who had ultimately ended "massive resistance," albeit involuntarily) and expressing hope for future friendship between the African American community and the Executive Mansion. He may also have been hinting circumspectly at the future of race relations in a post-*Brown* Virginia.

Historians Lewis Randolph and Gayle Tate have argued that black political leaders in mid-century Virginia, especially in the urban areas, often allied themselves with arms of the Byrd machine for reasons of mutual benefit. Few African Americans could vote, so the ones who had successfully registered were eager to protect their franchise. Randolph and Tate concur with V.O. Key's 1949 assessment that machine politicians protected black voters in areas where black voters voted for machine candidates. "Those blacks who aligned themselves with the local arms of the Byrd machine," they argue, "did so because it was politically and economically expedient."¹²⁴ The transcripts of *Open for Opinion* programs suggest a more nuanced African American strategy. Perhaps black

¹²³ CD-406: "Open for Opinion," Jan. 5, 1962, LVA: WRVA Radio.

¹²⁴ Randolph and Tate, *Rights for a Season*, 115. Randolph and Tate were citing V.O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949).

Richmonders curried some favor with elected officials, but their motives were not necessarily political or economic. By casting the relationship between the black community and white political elite as symbiotic, Burton was going farther than asking for political *quid pro quo*. After the passage of *Brown*, the state and federal courts' rulings on school closings, and the growing visibility and strength of civil rights protests across the South, Burton was reinterpreting race relations in light of the shifting cultural terrain.

A third African American caller, Mrs. Dulvy Carlson of Richmond's West End, addressed racial politics head-on by asking "Did [Almond] think segregation was, you know, a good thing?"¹²⁵ Frank Brooks was taken aback by the directness of the question, but gave it to Almond anyway. Almond's response lacked some of the statesmanlike bluster of his earlier answers:

I must be perfectly frank with you. I thought it was a good thing. I still think it's a good thing. I think the decision of the Supreme Court of the United States was wrong. I don't think they construed the Constitution of the United States, I think they amended it. However they made that decision which they did make. It is binding on the states, and we must put the interest of all of our people and of our states above our prejudices. We must see that Virginia goes forward and I can assure you that under the present administration that we are maintaining a system of public education without discrimination on the basis of race, and I assure you that that will continue.¹²⁶

Here, then, was Lindsay Almond's final word on "massive resistance" to school desegregation. In response to a question posed by a black woman, Almond articulated the position that had alienated Harry Byrd and the hardline segregationists. He offered no apology, but he did offer measured acceptance of change, and he waved a flag of defeat for "massive resistance." *Open for*

¹²⁵ CD-406: "Open for Opinion," Jan. 5, 1962, LVA: WRVA Radio.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

Opinion had provided a space in which a white southern governor had to explain his personal support for segregation, as well as the unconstitutionality of it, to a black woman in front of an audience of thousands. Black women were arguably the least empowered of all the Commonwealth's citizens, but Carlson could use the radio program to demand some measure of accountability from the most powerful man in the Commonwealth. *Open for Opinion* leveled the political playing field by opening channels that would otherwise have been closed; by facilitating unscripted dialogue that would have been impossible in almost all other local media.

★

By the early 1960s, WRVA had consciously established itself as a public forum for discussion of controversial issues, which could be anything from birth control to classroom discipline to civil rights activism. On New Year's Eve 1963, WRVA ran a 30-minute show entitled "Year of Contrasts" which spoke plainly about changes in Virginia politics and society, beginning with the "open sun-bleached fields and dark musty corridors" of the Prince Edward County schools, which had been closed for four years. The program's compilers included interviews with Governor Albertis Harrison as well as the president of the NAACP's Virginia chapter, Reverend L. Frances Griffin. After dwelling on Prince Edward County for nearly half the program, the show went on to discuss the proposed Richmond-Henrico merger, the unexpected election of two Virginia Republicans to the House of Representatives (the first in a generation), and the

Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) national conference, held in Richmond in September.¹²⁷

The SCLC conference brought black leaders from all over the country to Richmond, and WRVA interviewed several of them. The program included recorded speeches by or interviews with Martin Luther King, NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins, a local church deacon, and comedian Dick Gregory. The narrator refrained from editorial comment on King's plans for a sustained campaign of direct action in Alabama, but remarked "some of the ideas and ideals that came on the still warm summer air have since then been chilled by the cold realistic blasts of winter's coming." His interview with Wilkins suggested black leaders were not in complete agreement about the direction of the movement. The local deacon took a slightly different view, exclaiming "...my general is Martin Luther King, and I will follow – only – black generals!" Black comedian Dick Gregory poked fun at "welfare chisellers" and at test ban treaties that excluded "*colored* neighborhoods." The four sound clips depicted a divided black community, and provided some fodder for any listeners who were afraid of the civil rights movement. But by turning over approximately a third of a year-in-review program to a description of the SCLC conference and its debates, WRVA both advertised the movement's objectives and gave black leaders voices. The SCLC's promises were "broad in scope, sweeping in organization, and like political platforms, adhered to by few," the narrator concluded. "The plans and boycotts of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference...did not in most part transpire. But they were stated. And only 1964 can tell us if they will take effect."

¹²⁷ CD-415, "1963—A Year of Contrasts," aired Dec. [31], 1993, LVA: WRVA Radio.

The SCLC segment ended with a choir singing “We Shall Overcome” and a woman saying “we are not afraid.”¹²⁸

“1963—A Year in Contrasts” does not imply WRVA’s support for civil rights activism. But by *not* opposing civil rights platforms – or, even more importantly, by *not ignoring* the arguments of civil rights leaders and local African Americans – WRVA had included African Americans in a mainstream narrative of civil rights initiatives. The program’s narrator, though occasionally critical in his description of the SCLC and its platform, was equally if not more critical of the governor and Richmond City Council. A decade of conscious effort to expand the amount of information available to listeners, rooted in WRVA’s institutional commitment to fostering civic uplift and abiding by the industry’s standards of fairness, had evolved into a public forum that consistently, if reluctantly, included multiple perspectives on civil rights initiatives.

During the 1950s and 1960s, WRVA officials, and the listeners who pressured them, created a space for a relatively balanced conversation of desegregation and southern race relations in the mainstream media. Despite longstanding loyalties to the Byrd machine and pervasive feelings of anxiety about civil rights initiatives, the WRVA staff felt compelled to arrange for multiple perspectives on challenges to southern racial and social hierarchies. Professional standards of conduct and institutional commitments to “uplift” made it impossible for WRVA to follow in lock-step with “massive resistance” campaigns. Although employees such as Calvin Lucy may have privately contributed energy and resources to the campaign against desegregation, the

¹²⁸ Ibid.

station as a whole could not. And because radio affords opportunities for conversation and debate where printed media cannot, the dialogue about Richmond's race relations on WRVA was far more complex and nuanced than many other narratives available to the citizens of Richmond. And at 50,000 watts, many thousands of people in the state and further afield were privy to the complexities. In providing the nuanced dialogue, WRVA became a reluctant, but very real, cultural bacteria in the decomposition of the Byrd machine and the strain of southern conservatism that it represented.

WRVA and “the Unfolding Virginia Scene”: A Conclusion

On the occasion of WRVA's 50th anniversary in 1975, Virginia Governor Mills E. Godwin sent the station a letter of congratulations. “For half a century, radio station WRVA has established itself as an authoritative voice reflecting the unfolding Virginia scene while lending its support to innumerable worthy causes,” the governor wrote. “Its reputation, built with a continuous high degree of responsibility and skill, is the envy of others in the field.”¹ WRVA's history does, indeed, “reflect the unfolding Virginia scene” from 1925 until the 1960s, though not necessarily in the way that Governor Godwin was thinking. The station was born in an era of unbridled optimism as well as entrenched conservatism, a paradox reflected in much of WRVA's early programming. Over the next five decades, owners, broadcasters, and listeners would all negotiate the challenges, anxieties, and disruptions of a society in transition as inherited patterns of authority and power suffered beneath continuous assaults from below. Through the turbulence of the Great Depression, the Second World War, school desegregation, “massive resistance,” and the civil rights movements of the 1960s, the “Voice of Virginia's” programming reflected current affairs and debates over the future of the Commonwealth and nation.

The station's professed mission of “Public Service' to the citizens of Virginia and the nation” translated into “a program representative of the civic, religious, governmental, cultural and entertainment life of Virginia,” according to

¹ Mills E. Godwin, Jr., to WRVA, [1975]. *WRVA: Serving You for 50 Golden Years* ([Richmond, VA]: n. pub., 1975), a2.

the station's own publicity materials.² With every passing year, "uplift" assumed different forms, both for the broadcasters and the listeners. Broadcasters articulated interpretations of "uplift" based upon personal experience, beliefs, and professional and political exigencies. Listeners adopted a semi-proprietary relationship with WRVA, actively engaging with the station to define the needs and parameters of "public service" in terms that took listener concerns and preferences into account. Sometimes the station and the listeners agreed on a common purpose of "uplift," and sometimes they did not. The dialectic that emerged between WRVA and its listeners occasionally not only reflected current debates, but sometimes initiated, revised, or redirected them, all through the prism of radio.

WRVA described itself as operating "down where the South begins" as early as 1925, but station programming was never entirely clear on what that meant. The regular inclusion of minstrel songs like "Carry Me Back to Old Virginia" and blackface routines on the *Corn Cob Pipe Club* in the late 1920s evoked the imagined spaces of antebellum plantations as well as the carefully ordered racial hierarchies of a slave society. Much of WRVA's earliest programming pandered heavily in white nostalgia for the Old South, and gave white listeners the space to paint their racialized and gendered authority onto an imagined past. But WRVA officials were also acting as ambassadors of a new and transformative technology that often transcended conventions of race- and gender-based behavior in Jim Crow Virginia. Even as station managers paraded the racialized sounds of white hillbillies and black spiritual singers before the

² Walter R. Bishop, *WRVA Radio, 35 Years* (Richmond, VA: [WRVA?], 1960).

microphone – promoting the combination as “old-time” music – they were engaging in a performance that could only have been staged in the modern South. In WRVA's first few years of broadcasting, sounds of southernness were not neatly segregated by race, and airwaves paid no attention to boundaries between white homes and black homes, public spaces and private. Radio, one of the most easily recognizable symbols of the “New Era,” made it impossible for WRVA to regulate the way people *listened*, even if the station officials had wanted to. “Old-time” programming via the modern technology created sounds of confusion that illustrated the complexity of life in the modernizing South, where strictures of Jim Crow could not contain radio waves.

In 1939, WRVA became the most powerful radio station in the state and one of the most powerful radio stations in the country when it received an FCC license to broadcast at 50,000 watts. Ever since the late 1920s, WRVA had enthusiastically embraced national radio networks, running “chain broadcasts” alongside its own local productions. The “Voice of Virginia” carried local programming to the nation, and national programming to Virginia; as such, it walked a fine line between the station's self-proclaimed obligations to local listeners and its desire to be part of a national radio culture with a national listenership. The dramatic increase in transmitting power also meant that WRVA was now one of the most potentially powerful *political* tools in the Commonwealth, a fact recognized by station employees, politicians, and listeners.

Station manager Calvin T. Lucy looked upon the successful installation of a 50,000-watt transmitter as a highlight of his career. The white son of a tailor from Baltimore had come to Richmond in 1912 to launch his career, and eventually worked at the forefront of radio broadcasting in Virginia. He had always appreciated the potential political power of radio (and of radio broadcasters), and had courted the favor of some of Virginia's most influential leaders in the station's first two decades. Through his boss, William T. Reed, Sr., Lucy established a relationship with Harry Byrd that Lucy conscientiously maintained until Byrd's death in 1966. Lucy put the station in the service of Harry Byrd and the Byrd machine, but Lucy himself was undermining the principles of deference and authority that were at the foundation of Virginia's political culture. The 50,000-watt station, with its unprecedented ability to reach millions of people simultaneously, had disrupted the social hierarchies that predicated each person's status and opportunities in mid-century Virginia. Virtually overnight, a one-time sales clerk had become the gatekeeper to what was arguably Virginia's most powerful political tool. Lucy's career demonstrated social changes that were already afoot within a growing, urban, white middle class, and accelerated them.

Radio did not just provide white, middle-class men with a chance to exceed their "pay grade" in Harry Byrd's Virginia. Bertha Hewlett was able to leverage other people's expectations of white femininity and womanhood into a professional career that would last from 1925 until the 1970s. She took advantage of the confusion of WRVA's first years of broadcasting to insinuate

herself into every aspect of the station's business, becoming an indispensable member of WRVA's founding generation. She had advanced from the "station hostess" to a "Division Manager" at WRVA by 1951, and filled a supervisory role for the station until her retirement in 1971. Although many women had joined the workforce during the period of Hewlett's career, in Virginia as elsewhere, few had been able to forge professional careers in traditionally male-dominated fields like radio. Hewlett's contributions to WRVA's programming and management were a subtle and persistent critique of dominant southern norms of white womanhood. Julia Kirk Blackwelder has argued that urban, white, middle-class, southern women of the 1930s were "caught between nostalgia for the Old South and a desire to embrace the New South."³ They simultaneously wanted or felt pressured to uphold romanticized ideals of antebellum white womanhood, and wanted or felt pressured to carve out a position in a modernizing South. Hewlett did not uphold ideals of white womanhood from either the "Old South" or the "New South," but instead let *others* project ideals onto her. She was then able to quietly pursue a successful career on her own terms, sidestepping the heavily gendered prerequisites for inclusion in southern business that might otherwise have stymied her efforts.

Virginia, and to some extent the entire South, faced unresolved questions of identity in the years after the Second World War. After the upheavals of the Great Depression, the New Deal, and the war itself, it was no longer clear whether the South was "nationalizing" – achieving a measure of parity with the

³ Blackwelder, "Women and Leadership: A Century of Change in the South," in *The American South in the Twentieth Century*, 39-55. See pp. 43-44 especially.

rest of the country in economic opportunity and quality of living – or becoming more regionally distinct. WRVA reacted to the moment of uncertainty with a significant policy change that illustrated the station officials' commitment to their particular understandings of "tradition" and transformations in Virginia systems of race. Instead of adopting a top-40 format of popular music, WRVA (re)invested in the "hillbilly." Just at the moment that Richmond and Virginia appeared poised to revise age-old systems of power and become more cosmopolitan, WRVA countered the changes by "whitewashing" the dial and celebrating the alleged purity and simplicity of the guardians of "authentic" Anglo-Saxon heritage. Through much of the 1950s, WRVA's hillbilly programming offered up a "solution" to white anxieties about transformations in Virginia, if only imagined. On the one hand, hillbilly entertainment provided a deceptively easy "escape" from debates about Virginia's future. But on the other, it recapitulated long-standing, unresolved discourses of race – and whiteness in particular – that were at the heart of Virginia's political and social transformations of the 1950s.

WRVA's most famous performer, Sunshine Sue, also known as Mary Workman, was the figurehead for WRVA's hillbilly operation in the late 1940s and 1950s on the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*. She was a political actor in her own right, even if unintentionally, and became the vehicle for complex cultural debates about race, class, and gender in mid-century Virginia. The governor of Virginia, William Tuck, coronated her as the "Queen of the Hillbillies," and the white newspapers grappled with the unusual specter of a successful, white, career woman who played music that celebrated "traditional" gender norms. Like

Hewlett, Mary Workman had leveraged herself into the radio business, and established a virtual hillbilly entertainment empire in Richmond. Despite – or because of – her success in a traditionally male-dominated enterprise, she presented a public image of gentleness, maternal devotion, and conventional femininity. WRVA's hillbilly programming may have been a reaction against change in the modern South, but by giving Mary Workman a stage on Capitol Hill, the station effectively subverted the traditional gender norms that station officials seemed to prefer.

Governor Tuck was a devotee of the *Old Dominion Barn Dance*, and especially Mary Workman. He stood at the helm of state politics and the conservative Democratic party, but he reveled in the music of rural and working-class white Virginians. During the day he passed anti-union legislation and kept the franchise out of the hands of working-class whites and African Americans, but at night he had a standing reservation at the barn dance. Tuck ruled from the Governor's Mansion, the General Assembly legislated from the Capitol building, and less than a hundred yards away from them both, Sunshine Sue reigned on the stage of the Lyric Theatre as a queen of working-class white folks. The *Old Dominion Barn Dance* sold "tradition" as a form of escape and celebration of hard-working people. Tuck and the legislators sold "tradition" and precedent as the justification for their authority in postwar Virginia. The one did not seem to lead to the other. As the labor struggles of the late 1940s suggested, the same people who bought tickets to the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* did not necessarily "buy" the old argument that "tradition" was a viable political strategy, and not

simply a form of entertainment. The *Old Dominion Barn Dance* reflected the cracks in the class-based hierarchies of Harry Byrd's Virginia, and wedged them open wider.

WRVA officials may have personally aligned themselves with the conservative politicians of 1950s Virginia, but industry standards for newscasting and listener pressure forced the station to maintain narratives of school desegregation, "massive resistance," and the civil rights movement that were more nuanced than the narratives articulated by the second-largest purveyors of local media, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and the *Richmond News Leader*. WRVA's continued relationship with the national networks meant that listeners had access to both local news and national news. When local news *became* national news, as in the case of school desegregation, listeners ended up with multiple interpretations of the same set of events, subverting the efforts of segregationists who were trying to control the narrative. African American listeners and the black ministers and congregations who participated in the *Negro Church Services* series were especially effective not only at petitioning station officials for balanced news coverage, but also implicitly revising norms of race and morality in 1950s and 1960s Virginia. Once on the microphone, black Virginians seized the opportunity to actively insert their voices and dissenting opinions into a conversation about race and freedom that had arguably never been as public, or as unrepressed, in the Commonwealth's history. WRVA, bound by its promises of "public service," felt obligated to provide the multiple perspectives on school desegregation that listeners demanded, and ultimately

created a forum for debate that was deliberately more open and inclusive than forums elsewhere in the white media.

Edward Ayers suggests that “modernity has appeared [in the South’s history] in strange places and in strange combinations.”⁴ When it went on the air in 1925, WRVA announced its intention to serve in the public’s interest, a promise that was repeated innumerable times in the decades that followed. The station’s founding generation of broadcasters believed that the road to success lay in earning the loyalty of listeners through demonstrations of goodwill as well as quality programming. Initially, station officials courted listeners in order to sell tobacco and advertising, but listeners soon made it clear that they were not just consumers but active conversants in discussions about the future of the state and the nation. On occasion, the station seemed to embrace the transformations of modern America, and then at other times, the station made concerted efforts to roll back or contain transformations. Listeners also sometimes expressed support for innovation, while expressing anxiety about change at other times. On more than one occasion, as the dissertation demonstrates, the station and its listeners were not in agreement about what constituted “desirable” or “undesirable” changes.

WRVA ultimately served not so much as a mirror but as a prism for unresolved tensions within mid-century Virginia. Radio rendered seemingly impenetrable citadels of power susceptible to disruption and revision. The technology stood outside of the carefully constructed hierarchies of class, race, and gender upon which Jim Crow was built. Never all that stable to begin with,

⁴ Ayers, *What Caused the Civil War?*, 10.

the hierarchies were undermined by the disproportionate political and cultural power that the “Voice of Virginia” – and the people who gained access to its microphones – wielded in the Old Dominion. Once radio created a space for accessible interrogations of the status quo, officials, performers, and listeners engaged in a dialogue whose very existence undermined the foundations of Harry Byrd’s Virginia.

Epilogue

As of this writing, WRVA still calls itself the “50,000-watt Voice of Virginia” and broadcasts from 1140 on the AM dial. The station airs syndicated talk shows provided by Clear Channel Communications, its current owner. The station that also calls itself “Richmond’s Home for Sean Hannity” only has two locally-originating weekday shows as of Fall 2011: *Richmond’s Weekday Morning News with Jimmy Barrett* and the *Doc Thompson Show*, both of which are on the air during peak commuting hours. The rest of its line-up consists of Clear Channel syndications such as *Coast to Coast AM*, *The Glenn Beck Show*, *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, and *Michael Savage*.⁵ The station that once reveled in bringing sounds of the nation into the homes of Virginia listeners now brings them conservative talking heads, and the occasional NASCAR race. The station that once asked Elvis Presley to leave the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* because he was too lewd now has “Babe Photo Galleries” on its website where visitors are treated

⁵ Weekly schedule according to www.1140wrva.com, accessed Oct. 1, 2011.

to photos of “Babe of the Day,” “Thong of the Day,” and “Wet on the Net.”⁶ The station that once promised to operate “for the City’s sake” now operates for the sake of Clear Channel Communications.⁷ The “Voice of Virginia,” of which Governor E. Lee Trinkle once said “few greater gifts could have been presented to the state or its people,” is now an example of media consolidation and the demise of local radio.⁸

WRVA is no longer in the hands of the community from which it was born. Its road from locally-owned radio station to outpost for a national media conglomerate was not inevitable, but perhaps it was predictable. When Larus and Brother Company reorganized in 1968, the station became incorporated as WRVA Radio, Inc.⁹ Within the next year, WRVA Radio, Inc. sold itself to the Southern Broadcasting Company (SBC), who held onto it until 1977 when a Dallas-based newspaper publishing company called Harte-Hanks Communications bought SBC.¹⁰ Harte-Hanks sold WRVA to Edens Broadcasting Company in 1984. And just a few weeks before the *Old Dominion Barn Dance* revival in Spring 1991, Edens initiated the sale of its holdings to Force II Communications, who turned around and sold it to Clear Channel

⁶ Also of incidental interest, the most popular podcast download from WRVA’s site on Oct. 1, 2011, was “Chris Christie Is Fat.” Calvin T. Lucy would not have recognized this as “real” news. Ibid.

⁷ “WRVA and Its Operators,” *Richmond News Leader*, Nov. 2, 1925, 8.

⁸ Trinkle quoted from Ray McAllister, “When WRVA Was Radio, and Life,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Jan. 23, 2003, B1. Clear Channel Communications took advantage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the attendant “deregulation” of radio to wage a consolidation blitz. It managed to acquire ownership of about 1/10 of all radio stations in the U.S. within a few years. Comparative few locally owned stations were left alive. Robert L. Hilliard and Michael C. Keith, *The Quieted Voice: The Rise and Demise of Localism in American Radio* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 5.

⁹ Minute Book, No. 1 – Charter Box (WRVA Radio, Inc.), LVA: WRVA Radio.

¹⁰ Harte-Hanks, Inc., *Annual Report*, 1978, LVA: WRVA Radio.

Communications the following year.¹¹ According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the media conglomerate bought WRVA and three other stations from Edens Broadcasting for \$18.5 million.¹² Once WRVA left the umbrella of Larus and Brother, and particularly after the dissolution of the SBC, WRVA was caught up in a wave of consolidation that placed it in the hands of ever-larger companies, moving the station farther from its local foundation with every transfer.

In a last effort to maintain the ties between WRVA and the Richmond community, the general managers of WRVA and its sister FM station WRVQ, as well as the general manager from WWDE in Hampton, tried to raise the funds to buy the stations themselves from Edens in 1991, but they could not compete with the Force II Communications offer. WRVQ general manager J. Philip Goldman expressed disappointment, but tried to reassure concerned Richmonders that “I can’t imagine that he’d [Force II Communications CEO Norman Feuer] make any changes. He has a record of leaving [radio stations] as they are and letting them continue to grow.”¹³ Unfortunately for WRVA, once Force II Communications sold the station to Clear Channel Communications the next year, the assurances evaporated into thin air. In 2006, Clear Channel laid off most of WRVA’s news team in favor of an approach where news anchors read sound bites from other sources. WRVA reporter Tom Callan claimed “the new strategy virtually eliminates the idea of a traditional newsroom, where reporters take tips, pursue leads and hit the street.” “I think that local newsgathering is completely

¹¹ “Edens Agrees to Sell WRVA, WRVQ,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Feb. 23, 1991, B1, B4.

¹² “Clear Channel Acquires Stations,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 2, 1992, B5.

¹³ “Edens Agrees to Sell WRVA, WRVQ,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Feb. 23, 1991, B1, B4.

eviscerated,” he concluded.¹⁴ There would be no more local WRVA news reports.

I do not mean to suggest a declension narrative for WRVA’s history; the station was not a utopian arena for free and balanced democratic expression that fell victim to the twin forces of consolidation and globalization. But the fact that WRVA was part of both national *and* local broadcasting communities meant that the station never had a single “owner” – neither literally nor figuratively. Entertainment shows came from New York, Chicago, and the studios of Hotel Richmond. *The Sunshine Hour* and the *Negro Church Services* came from down the street. Newscasts came in the form of CBS reports from home and overseas, as well as *Sideviews on the News* from WRVA news editor Jack Clements. Listeners, too, came from all over, bringing diverse expectations and perspectives to the “Voice of Virginia.” From the white men in Boston who formed *Corn Cob Pipe Club* clubs to revel in the exotic otherness of hillbilly music to the black Richmonders who heard Edward R. Murrow’s “Lost Class of ‘59” broadcast and began boycotting segregated businesses, WRVA’s listeners brought varied and often conflicting preferences to bear on the station’s programming from its conception through the 1960s. The result was a blend of sounds that was deliberately open to many, and therefore more inclusive, than it would have been had officials attempted to sacrifice the local for the national, or the national for the local. For its first fifty years, the “Voice of Virginia” created a conversation that listeners could engage with and draw individual meanings from, facilitating civic debates about the direction of a modern South. At present, such

¹⁴ Jason Roop, “WRVA News Pares to Hub, ‘Rewriting,’” *Style Weekly*, Nov. 8, 2006.

a conversation is impossible because WRVA is no longer tied to any one place or any particular group of listeners, and is instead an outpost for programming sent from the corporate boardroom.

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Vita

Caroline Chandler Morris

Caroline Chandler Morris was born in Richmond, Virginia, where she attended the Governor's School for Government and International Studies, graduating in 1999. She went on to study at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, where she received a B.A. with High Distinction in History and Italian. She received her M.A. degree from the College of William and Mary in 2005, with a thesis entitled "Down Where the South Begins': Virginia Radio and the Conversation of Nationhood." During her time in the Ph.D. program, she served as a teaching assistant, a teaching fellow, the Glucksman Fellow, and the Lemon Project Fellow at the College of William and Mary. She has also taught courses at Virginia Commonwealth University. She is currently teaching at Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia, while working as the lead historian for the Fulton Oral History Project. She defended her dissertation in January 2012.